



## Prevention of Sexual Abuse in Massage Therapy

Prevention of Sexual Abuse Symposium Report provided to the College of  
Massage Therapists of Ontario

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## Executive Summary

On November 10, 2023, the College of Massage Therapists of Ontario (CMTO or the College) held a Prevention of Sexual Abuse Symposium, the first event for the organization which focused on sexual abuse prevention. The facilitated event brought together a variety of health system partners to learn about and discuss sexual abuse in Massage Therapy and identify ways to collaborate on prevention initiatives.

Representatives from each of the following groups participated in the symposium: Registered Massage therapists (RMTs), Massage Therapy employers, educators, client advocates, legal counsel, and other regulators both in Massage Therapy and other Ontario health professions. Attendees received background material in advance and were asked to be prepared to comment on the material and on sexual abuse in Massage Therapy from their perspective. This report provides a summary of the themes which emerged from the discussion and a list of proposed actions for preventing sexual abuse, some of which have already been initiated by involved organizations.

## Introduction

Sexual abuse in Massage Therapy is a complex problem and encompasses issues of sex, gender, power, and communication. While the vast majority of Massage Therapy treatments that take place in Ontario are performed professionally and provide therapeutic benefit to the client, a higher percentage of complaints received by CMTO relate to sexual abuse of the client compared to those received by other provincial health regulatory colleges. As well, and similarly reported by other regulators, cases of sexual abuse reported to the College have been increasing, possibly in part due to changes in societal awareness and an overall increase in such reporting.

All health professionals are at risk of committing boundary violations, but the unique nature of Massage Therapy can increase vulnerability or feelings of vulnerability for clients. Specifically, it is touch-based, Massage Therapy lasts longer than interactions with many other health professionals, and it takes place in a private setting with the client partially or fully unclothed and often unable to see as a result of dim lighting and/or body position.

A key goal in CMTO's Strategic Plan is sexual abuse prevention. In November 2023 the College held a symposium to bring together various health system partners to collaborate on prevention techniques/initiatives. Attendees included registered massage therapists (RMTs), Massage Therapy employers and educators, client advocates, legal counsel, and regulators of Massage Therapy in other jurisdictions as well as of other Ontario health professions.

Prior to the symposium, attendees received background material which included a discussion paper and five case studies. The discussion paper outlined the Ontario healthcare context of sexual abuse, the process by which the College investigates sexual abuse complaints, data regarding such complaints, current CMTO sexual abuse prevention initiatives, and discussion questions. Attendees were asked to be prepared to comment on the material and on sexual abuse in Massage Therapy from their health system partner perspective. There was agreement from the beginning on the need for an open, honest conversation, and that there would be no later attribution of specific comments or opinions.

During the symposium, attendees reviewed the case studies that had been constructed based on actual CMTO information and were intended to illustrate the types of complaints received by the College. Attendees were asked to consider and discuss whether and how the sexual abuse could have been prevented in each of the situations. Final remarks from each attendee included suggestions for future prevention of sexual abuse actions based on their professional knowledge and experience as well as learnings from other attendees. As a next step, CMTO will work with partners to prioritize actions and implement them in a collaborative way.

The symposium concluded with a collective commitment to enact steps to prevent sexual abuse in Massage Therapy, recognizing that there are no quick or simple solutions. There was also an acknowledgement that there will need to be continued vigilance, constant evolution, and improvement on all fronts. Attendees uniformly expressed the view that preventing sexual abuse in Massage Therapy will require a multipronged approach, including collaboration between organizations involved in education, certification, regulation, employment, and advocacy and continuous education, together with public/client communication and support.

## Summary of Themes

The following themes emerged from discussions at the symposium and provide context for the list of proposed actions:

- There is a need for more data (regarding RMTs with findings of sexual abuse) to be collected and shared between organizations and institutions to better understand the problem of sexual abuse in Massage Therapy. This would assist in the early identification of “red flags” related to concerning behaviour such as the testing of boundaries by students in Massage Therapy programs.
- The possibility of clients having lived experience of sexual trauma is generally unrecognized and is one example of the need for better understanding of the client perspective.
- Providing information about the public protection role of CMTO needs to occur early in the training of Massage Therapists and needs to be emphasized to clients.
- All health professionals, including Massage Therapists require coaching and mentoring at the beginning of and throughout their career, particularly when practicing independently or remotely.
- The practice or employment environment of any health professional must emphasize and support adherence to standards of practice and codes of ethics.
- Clear communication with clients, written and verbally, needs to be taught, tested, reinforced in practice and built into the practical processes of conducting Massage Therapy. This is particularly important regarding the treatment of sensitive areas and getting informed consent to do so.
- Client consent documentation currently in use is misunderstood and potentially perceived as protective of the RMT in terms of limiting liability, rather than a tool intended to help the client understand and consent to the proposed treatment.
- Inappropriate sexualization of therapeutic massage can be committed by either the client or therapist and the protection of both parties needs to be addressed.
- The viewpoint of RMTs is important in developing strategies and solutions to prevent sexual abuse.

## Ideas for Collaborative Action Education

1. Pursuit of accreditation of Massage Therapy schools with the goal of ensuring consistent curriculum development according to established competencies to improve the education of Massage Therapists and support the prevention of sexual abuse.
2. Initiation of vulnerable sector screening for prospective students.
3. Completion by students upon beginning Massage Therapy programs, of a declaration or attestation to act in accordance with ethical standards and principles of professionalism.
4. Including sexual abuse case studies in the training of Massage Therapists, with an emphasis on client perspective and vulnerability, trauma informed care, and the prevention of boundary violations.
5. Prioritizing teaching of ethics and professionalism in the curriculum of Massage Therapy programs.
6. Planning a sexual abuse prevention symposium for educators and academics, emphasizing early modeling of ensuring client safety and linking clinical theory to real-life practice.

7. Provision of sensitivity training for clinic owners, managers, employers around the theme of “what you permit, you promote”.

## Communication

8. Creation and distribution of communications (e.g. a newsletter) addressed to educators, academics, and students to inform about new data, trends and public expectations related to the practice of Massage Therapy and other relevant health professions.
9. Increasing opportunities for connection between students and CMTO to emphasize the public protection role of the regulator and the importance of ethics and professionalism in the practice of Massage Therapy (building on statements currently included in CMTO policy communication that “this applies to RMTs, students, teachers...”).
10. Inclusion of sexual abuse information in all internal and external presentations by educators, CMTO and other partners to increase awareness and thoughtfulness about its prevention.

## Standards and Practice

11. More rigorous and nationally consistent entry to practice examinations related to situations in which sexual abuse might occur, including client draping and appropriate client communication.
12. Requiring a declaration at entry to practice committing to preventing sexual abuse by maintaining standards of ethical practice, professionalism, and client-centred care.
13. Encouraging or requiring current registrants to complete the new Jurisprudence module, particularly the segment related to sexual misconduct and prevention of sexual abuse.
14. Publication by CMTO of information regarding the costs of sexual abuse proceedings and the consequences for registrants.
15. Developing continuing education for Registered Massage Therapists (via STRiVE) that includes content on optimal client communication and documentation regarding consent and treating sensitive areas, including appropriate draping techniques, professionalism, and the role of CMTO in public protection.
16. Annual attestation of understanding of sexual abuse prevention at the time of registration renewal and/or employment contract renewal.
17. Developing a client focused poster with a QR code that can be displayed in every practice setting to clarify client expectations of a Massage Therapist and to increase awareness of CMTO and its complaint process.
18. Developing a one-page reminder for employers on practical steps to prevent sexual abuse and mandatory reporting requirements.
19. Re-formulation of client consent documentation so that information regarding the touching of sensitive body areas as part of the treatment plan is clear and consistent with clinical rationale and supports proper communication with the client.
20. Developing a video or other visual aids for clients and Massage Therapists to improve communication regarding the need to touch sensitive areas, such as the chest wall and upper thigh.
21. Mentorship and coaching of newly registered Massage Therapists, especially those in independent or isolated practice, in the handling of difficult situations such as those which might lead to sexual abuse or misconduct.

22. Re-engineering the Massage Therapy appointment process to include more opportunities for the Therapist to meaningfully interact with the client to clarify consent to treatment.
23. Developing a process of post-therapy communication with the client to include discussion of discomfort or future treatment adjustments.
24. Increasing supervision of Massage Therapists early in practice to reinforce client-based care
25. Instituting rigorous serious incident handling policies for employers.
26. “Mystery shopping” conducted by employers.
27. Diligence by all health system partners in monitoring and tracking discernible patterns of unethical behaviour based on available information.
28. Finding and supporting “champions” of sexual abuse prevention within the profession who can assist in breaking down attitudes of denial (“if I don’t understand the problem, I can ignore the message”) and encouraging open dialogue.
29. Continuing ongoing work with other Ontario health regulators to better understand “sloppy” vs intentionally harmful practice, and best practices to inform registrants of improvement strategies and techniques.
30. Developing a plan to understand the prevalence of sexual abuse of Massage Therapists by clients and to provide guidance for students, new registrants, and established RMTs on how to manage situations where it might occur.

## **Conclusion**

One of the goals of CMTO’s Strategic Plan is to prevent sexual abuse, supported by prioritizing collaboration with partners on prevention initiatives, educating students, educators, RMTs and the public, and embedding prevention in CMTO’s programs. CMTO has embarked on several initiatives to prevent sexual abuse and recognizes that a variety of health system partners have unique roles to play in better understanding and solving this problem. One step in addressing the issue of sexual abuse was to bring these partners together to shed light on the work that is already underway, learn from each other’s experience and perspective, and find new ways to collaborate for the protection of the public.

With the production of a comprehensive list of proposed actions, symposium attendees supported the concept of “many pieces needing many partners” to achieve the goal of sexual abuse prevention. Along with the recognition that there is much to be done, there was commitment from each represented organization that the work has begun and will continue to progress in this model of learning and sharing.