

RX SPA

Therapist training

IS IT KEEPING PACE WITH THE SPA BOOM? AND JUST WHO SETS THE STANDARDS? SOME SURPRISING INFORMATION • BY AIMEE LEE BALL

PRETEND FOR A MOMENT THAT THERE ARE TWO identical spas, one in Nebraska and one in Texas. The decor is the same; the treatment menus are the same; the prices are the same. In which one are you likely to get the better Swedish massage?

Based on therapist training regulations, you'd have to choose Nebraska. Along with New York, it requires more classroom preparation (1,000 hours) than any other state. Until recently, Texas ranked at the bottom, mandating only 300 hours. Of course, these figures don't take into account individual talent: There can be 1,000-hour mediocrities and 300-hour virtuosos. But from a statistical point of view, there's some evidence that those extra hours of education translate to satisfied customers. In a recent study conducted by the University of Colorado at Denver and the Health Sciences Center, participants who received massage from therapists with 950 hours of training

reported significantly greater amelioration of muscle soreness than those who received massage from therapists with 450 or 700 hours of education.

These statistics highlight two issues that get scant attention in the coverage of the current spa boom: Who sets the standards for therapist training, and is quality keeping up with demand? To find out, I spoke with deans at some of the premier training academies, spa directors and resort executives, professional associations, and governmental agencies involved in setting requirements and supervising the industry. It didn't take long to ascertain that this area doesn't lend itself to hard-and-fast conclusions, but here's the big picture.

- The United States has no national standard for therapist training. Licensure is regulated by individual states. (See "Ten Toughest States" on page 131.)
- Twelve states have no statewide requirements.
- Canada has some of the most rigorous train-

Five Top Massage Schools

Boulder College of Massage Therapy, Boulder, CO

1,000-hour program is double the national standard.

Florida School of Massage, Gainesville, FL

Incorporates 190 hours of anatomy, physiology, and kinesiology and innovative teaching tools such as clay modeling and body painting.

International Professional School of Bodywork, San Diego, CA

Founded in 1977 and still combines body awareness and movement (students practice tai chi) with "consciousness-raising" techniques of that era.

Swedish Institute, New York, NY

Founded in 1916; oldest program in the U.S. Sixteen-month course surpasses 1,000-hour New York State requirement. May be bought by Cortiva.

Utah College of Massage Therapy, UT, NV, AZ, and CO

800-plus-hour program, about two-thirds hands-on; classes incorporate breathing and stretching to foster body-consciousness. Owned by Steiner Leisure.

ing programs in North America, and British Columbia leads, requiring 3,000 hours.

■ In Mexico there are no national licensing requirements. The same goes for the Caribbean, where resorts often look for graduates of solid U.S. and Canadian massage schools. At Malliouhana on Anguilla, managing director Nigel Roydon says he hires only Anguillan therapists who have trained in the U.S. or Canada.

■ In Southeast Asia, according to Neil Jacobs, Four Seasons' senior vice president of operations in Asia and the Pacific, "we rely upon our own training. There is no real meaningful certification in most countries out here. The Thais, Indonesians, Filipinos, and Indians have such a history of treatment, and we are able to find great healing hands and, more often than not, an inbred sense of hospitality."

■ Eastern Europe has some of the best raw talent, as therapists often study medicine before qualifying.

■ Big corporations are starting to buy and operate massage schools. The jury is still out on whether standardizing therapist training will be a boon.

■ At luxury resorts, therapist competence is usually high because these properties can be selective in hiring and often supplement basic schooling with their own training. "We're getting a graduate level of training here," says Suzanne DeFranco, a therapist at the Montage Resort and Spa in Laguna Beach, California, which pays for therapist training. In some parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia, the resorts *are* the massage schools.

■ There's assurance in the fact that the profession tends to draw nurturing people: It's often a calling, not just a job.

STATES' RIGHTS In a 2005 survey by the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), the leading trade group for the industry, 92 percent of the therapists surveyed agreed that there should be national minimum education standards for massage therapists. But in the U.S., the regulation of professions occurs mostly at the state level. This arrangement leads to major discrepancies but allows laws to be tailored to local concerns and conditions. "Regulating every profession

is a state's right," says Kathleen Doyle, the executive secretary for the New York State Board for Massage Therapy. "Populations differ, and states commonly regulate differently."

You get a different picture when you delve a bit deeper. "When we go to the state to present new classes, we're sitting next to refrigerator repairmen and the people from Happy Dog Grooming," says Elaine Calenda, the academic dean of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy in Colorado. "This is still vocational education." That distinction partially explains the discrepancy in state standards. "In 1985, at the time the licensing law was passed, it was mostly Swedish massage for relaxation purposes," explains Heather Muehr, a former director of the Massage Therapy Licensing Program in Texas. "People are just now coming around to seeing massage differently." Two years ago, a measure to increase the required education was defeated in the state legislature, but a bill was recently passed that will raise licensing requirements from 300 to 500 hours as of September 1. "It will make reciprocity easier," says Muehr. "Our people have trouble getting licensed when they move to another state."

The situation becomes slightly comical in the 12 states that leave regulation to counties and municipalities, including California, which is known in the industry as the "patchwork state." "My license in different cities costs anywhere from \$150 to \$700," says DeFranco. "In Laguna Beach, they want me to go to a doctor and get a certificate that says I don't have a social disease." A former Arizona spa director relates that there was one set of standards for therapists when the spa was zoned within city limits and another when it was rezoned outside them. Colorado has one of the country's most highly regarded massage training centers (See "Five Top

Massage Schools," opposite) but no state controls. "We'd like to see fair and consistent licensure laws in every state, but there are political realities to deal with," says Bill Brown, the director of government relations at AMTA. "It's costly to run a program for administrating the licenses or enforcing against those practicing without a license or doing unsavory things."

When it comes to special modalities such as Thai massage, a therapist may have no more than a few days' training—a reality that mirrors what's happening in the medical world, where a dermatologist may spend a weekend learning about lasers and start incorporating that limited knowledge into her practice on Monday. "It's the same thing in fitness," says Jim Root, the general manager of spa operations at Sea Island Resorts in Georgia. "You can go to a weekend seminar and become a Pilates teacher. We don't offer Thai right now because I can't pull it off." The road to training seems to need some speed bumps. "People do a weekend course and say they're qualified to do hot stones," says John Roseby, the executive spa director at Canyon Ranch. "It's rare that I've had good hot stone service anywhere in the United States. It's supposed to get into the belly of the muscle, but too often now the therapist is using stones just to glide over the body."

There are forces pushing for national standardization without making the government responsible for it. The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork began administering examinations in 1992 to advance more uniform standards of practice. Its exams are now part of the credentialing requirements in 31 states and Washington, D.C. The Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards is working toward creating a national standard for licensure. "It is definitely true that regulation dif-

fers widely from state to state," confirms Stephen Fridley, the executive director of the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation, which accredits institutions and training programs. "In some states, anyone can hang out a shingle and say, 'I'm a massage therapist.' There has been an increasing trend toward regulation, but typically there's a grandfathering-in of people who are already in practice."

THE LUXURY RESORT FACTOR To some degree, the spa industry is a meritocracy. Like medical residents, massage therapists learn on the job, but the top U.S. spa resorts don't usually hire neophytes: Their therapists play in the minors first. "I won't hire anybody who doesn't have two years' experience," says Lynne Vertrees, the director of spa-treatment development at Lake Austin Spa Resort in Texas. "It's only as you grow that you learn how to be nurturing, how to take care of the body, how to listen. Someone coming out of school has all the hours required, but I think our guests deserve the best." At Canyon Ranch, at least one year's experience is required. "We expect them to get their feet wet before coming to us," says Roseby, who has every potential bodyworker treat three senior staff members. "It's not only, Did we like the pressure? We're assessing attitude, communication, and attention to comfort as well as technique. Is the person familiar with the use of both oil and lotion, the use of tools like a bolster or face cradle, and draping? Is there awareness of modesty and appropriate boundaries?"

Spas at luxury properties, both here and abroad, sometimes act as graduate schools, refining talented therapists. "Worldwide, the keys to a great provider are care and technique," says Anne McCall Wilson, the vice president of spas for Fairmont and Raffles hotels. "In

some cultures, the care comes naturally and the technique needs to be taught. In other countries, education and technique are the focus; care and finesse need to be nurtured." At every Willow Stream spa (Fairmont's top spa brand), whether in Miami or Dubai, therapists undergo a training program that's as much about sensitivity as about strokes (including such topics as what do if a client starts to cry), and they're encouraged to earn credits in an "Energy Masters Program" by doing advanced courses and treatment evaluations. "Otherwise, they may still be in their head," says Wilson, "not reading your body, trying to remember: I need to spend three minutes here."

At the spas designed and implemented by Espa in Peninsula Hotels and other locations, the postgraduate work varies. "We try to recruit qualified therapists with anatomy and physiology as a basis," says Susan Harmsworth, Espa's founder and CEO. "But it's completely different in every country. In Eastern Europe or Russia, historically they've had to study medicine before they become therapists. They learn quickly because they understand the body, but their guest

10 Toughest States*

1. Nebraska: 1,000 hours
2. New York: 1,000 hours
3. New Hampshire: 750 hours
4. North Dakota: 750 hours
5. Mississippi: 700 hours
6. New Mexico: 650 hours
7. Ohio: 600 hours
8. Utah: 600 hours
9. Wisconsin: 600 hours
10. Hawaii: 570 hours

**By number of hours required for license. National average is 560 hours.*

skills and holistic skills are weaker. In Asia, it's the opposite: no anatomy and physiology, which scares me to death, but they have graciousness."

Regional trainers recruit for Six Senses Resorts and Spas in Asia and Europe. "We look for people who have that hard-to-define 'it,' the natural gift of healing with their hands, and we teach the techniques," says Angela Derks, who is known as the "holistic conscience" of that company's executive spa team. "People starting from scratch could need 50 hours of anatomy and physiology. We move into the healing energetic therapies; then we start teaching massage. We might put them with a Thai master for refining, particularly when they do stretches. We train them in things like safety and sterilization—sometimes they think that running equipment under water is good enough. They're not allowed to touch guests until they've been approved by the spa manager."

Once you drop below the luxury-resort level in parts of the world where there are no licensing requirements, it's anybody's guess whose hands are on you. "When I worked in the Bahamas [2002–2006], there was no licensure," says Christine Hays, now the director of spa operations for the Resort at Singer Island in Florida. "Consultants came from the States and did a six-week program, and therapists were literally recruited from Burger King." (There are still no licensure requirements in the Bahamas.)

SUPPLY AND DEMAND It seems that every Main Street beauty salon is now a "spa." A recent issue of *New York* magazine declared that the newest amenity offered by real estate developers is spa services: One building in the Wall Street area will have everything from Ayurvedic facials to

Tibetan hot stone massages. Every luxury hotel that opens today has a spa. Where are all these therapists coming from?

Some people in the spa industry believe that the demand has changed the nature of training. "Some of the newer massage schools are more oriented to feeding the hotel system, to churning out therapists as quickly as possible," says DeFranco. She adds that "there are still many good and great schools." Calenda sees significant burnout among therapists with poor training in body mechanics. "That's part of the picture with the diploma mills," she says. "A lot of people have been leaning toward easier schools, the ones that promise they can make US\$60 an hour on a cruise ship. There's a moving away from schools that have high standards and ethical concepts about the healing arts."

Despite the rise in consumer demand, enrollment in massage schools declined by almost 10 percent from 2004 to 2006, even as the number of training programs grew, according to a study by Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals. A new development is the corporate massage school. Steiner Leisure, a Bahamas-based company that runs spas aboard cruise ships, has acquired massage schools in Florida, Maryland, Utah, and Virginia, and the Cortiva Institute has done the same in eight states. The promise of corporate ownership is a high level of standardized training; the danger is a multi-state assembly line. "Contrary to what people believe, we're not looking to create a cookie-cutter curriculum," says Diane Trieste, the vice president of employer and alumni relations at the Cortiva Institute. "We're acquiring schools across the country to maintain the massage culture. It's in danger from vocational schools that are teaching other secondary-degree programs like auto-body mechanics and dental assistant-

ship." Trieste points out the exchange of information possible when an organization shares ten education directors and 200 faculty members. "Our collaborative ability is higher than anybody else in the business. This boom of spas over the past ten years has created such a vibration that massage schools are not paying attention to the needs of the industry. The consumer doesn't just want oil rubbed on his body. He wants to feel you're connecting with both his muscles and his energy."

Certainly, a massage doesn't have the same potential for damage as a laser in the wrong hands—a bad treatment is frustrating, not life-threatening. And regulations are no guarantee of satisfaction. "Absolutely, we are getting greener troops, but don't make that an indictment," says Root. "You could bring me someone who's been a therapist for 20 years, with all the credentials in the world, but I'm not interested unless there's a spirit of service. Show me a brand-new graduate of some massage school who has the potential and the touch, not necessarily the depth of experience but the heart of a servant. I will hire him, teach him, coach him, mentor him."

That kind of commitment to therapist training is a fringe benefit top spas give their guests. But at any spa, you can take the initiative before booking and ask: How long has the therapist been licensed? Where was the license issued? What massage school did the therapist attend? And how much training does he or she have in the modality I've chosen? Learning this background, along with choosing a spa brand known for selectivity and training, is your best safeguard against getting the wrong hands and the wish-I-hadn't-paid-for-that.

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