

Research as a Pathway to Advancing Interprofessional Integration

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Interprofessional collaboration enhances health care by fostering communication, improving patient outcomes, and integrating diverse expertise. For therapeutic massage and bodywork (TMB) practitioners, engaging in interprofessional practice remains a challenge due to professional silos, limited research engagement, and other barriers to integration within health-care teams. This article explores the potential of research as a mechanism for strengthening interprofessional collaboration, positioning TMB practitioners as active contributors to evidence-informed health care. By fostering a stronger research culture, TMB can enhance its role within health-care systems, create new opportunities for integration, and contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary patient care.

KEYWORDS: Interprofessional collaboration; therapeutic massage and bodywork; research engagement; interprofessional education; evidence-informed practice

INTRODUCTION

Interprofessional collaboration is essential for improving patient care, optimizing health-care resources, and fostering professional integration.^(1,2) Effective collaboration depends on clear communication, shared decision-making, and a mutual understanding of roles across disciplines. However, therapeutic massage and bodywork (TMB) practitioners often face challenges in fully engaging with interprofessional teams. Limited exposure to interprofessional education (IPE), a lack of shared professional language, and minimal participation in research have contributed to the profession's relative isolation within health-care systems.

Research offers a compelling opportunity to bridge these gaps. Beyond

advancing knowledge and refining clinical practice, research serves as a structured mechanism for engagement between disciplines. Through interdisciplinary research, TMB practitioners can develop a shared language, contribute to evidence-informed practice, and build meaningful professional relationships.^(3,4) These efforts not only benefit individual practitioners but also strengthen the profession's credibility and facilitate greater integration into collaborative health-care environments.

This article explores how research can serve as a pathway to interprofessional integration for TMB. It examines the role of IPE in preparing practitioners for research engagement, considers strategies for building research capacity within the profession, and identifies key facilitators for increasing research participation. By fostering a stronger research culture, TMB can enhance its contributions to health care, expand its role in interdisciplinary patient care, and establish itself as a vital part of interprofessional practice.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH TO ENHANCE INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

Interprofessional collaboration has the potential to strengthen health care by improving patient care and professional integration. For TMB practitioners, engaging more fully in collaborative health-care environments remains an ongoing challenge. One way to support this effort is through research. While research has long been a tool for advancing knowledge and refining practice, it also holds the potential to serve as a mechanism for building stronger professional connections, developing shared understanding, and enhancing communication among health-care providers.

If research were used intentionally as a strategy for interprofessional collaboration, it could create structured opportunities for

TMB practitioners to engage with other health professionals. Research provides a shared space where different disciplines examine clinical concerns, refine treatment approaches, and build professional relationships.⁽⁵⁾ This process could help clarify roles, align perspectives, and establish a stronger foundation for collaboration. Differences in role awareness, language, treatment models, and assessment methods often create barriers to interprofessional practice,⁽⁶⁾ but research offers a way to develop shared frameworks that support more coordinated decision-making and patient care.

Research provides a model for interprofessional engagement by bringing professionals together in structured ways, fostering knowledge exchange, and integrating diverse perspectives. For TMB practitioners, participating in interdisciplinary research presents an opportunity to reinforce their role in patient-centered care and contribute meaningfully to collaborative health-care settings. Expanding the research agenda to align with broader health-care priorities, such as pain management, rehabilitation, quality of life, and mental health, could strengthen the profession's integration within interprofessional teams. Demonstrating the impact of massage therapy through research would not only enhance its credibility but also support its recognition as an essential component of health care. This idea warrants further exploration, as it has the potential to transform professional relationships and create lasting pathways for collaboration.

Research plays a critical role in strengthening interprofessional collaboration by building professional credibility, expanding opportunities for integration, and enhancing patient care. However, research engagement among TMB professionals is often limited by gaps in formal education and training. The section titled "Interprofessional Education as a Foundation for Research and Practice" will explore how IPE can support this process by preparing TMB professionals for collaborative research early in their careers.

INTERPROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Health-care education has increasingly emphasized IPE as a means of fostering

collaboration among diverse health professionals. IPE brings students from different disciplines together to develop mutual understanding, communication skills, and research competencies, preparing them for team-based practice.⁽⁷⁾ For TMB practitioners, early exposure to interdisciplinary research and collaborative learning is essential for developing research literacy and strengthening their role in interprofessional health-care settings.

Despite the recognized benefits of IPE, TMB education has often been conducted in isolation from other health disciplines. This is likely influenced by the fact that TMB education is not offered within universities in many jurisdictions, reducing opportunities for engagement and collaboration with other health-care professions. In addition, many programs emphasize clinical skills with limited integration of research training or interprofessional collaboration. As a result, TMB practitioners enter the workforce with strong hands-on skills but little exposure to the roles and expertise of other health-care professionals. Without structured opportunities to learn alongside other disciplines, TMB professionals may find it challenging to integrate into interprofessional teams or contribute to collaborative research efforts.

IPE provides a pathway to address these gaps by preparing TMB practitioners for both interdisciplinary practice and research. Exposure to shared learning environments helps students build relationships with peers in other fields, understand health-care systems beyond their own discipline, and develop the skills necessary for interprofessional collaboration. These early experiences establish professional networks that support research engagement later in their careers, ensuring that TMB practitioners are positioned to participate in and lead interdisciplinary studies. At the very least, they help ease the hesitation in reaching out to other health-care professionals to discuss clinical cases or explore research collaborations.

Integrating TMB into IPE programs requires identifying opportunities for collaboration within existing educational structures. Joint coursework, shared clinical placements, and interdisciplinary research initiatives provide natural entry points for engagement. Once again, this is challenging as TMB educational programs are not often offered within the

same institution. When partnerships are possible, educational institutions can build interprofessional competencies, strengthen research literacy, and create a culture of collaboration.

IPE serves as a bridge between education, research, and practice. Incorporating TMB into interprofessional learning environments strengthens professional relationships, reinforces the value of TMB within health-care teams, and creates a foundation for meaningful research engagement. Expanding these opportunities will be essential for ensuring that TMB practitioners are fully prepared to contribute to the evolving landscape of interprofessional health care.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR RESEARCH IN THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE AND BODYWORK

Expanding research engagement within TMB requires deliberate efforts to build capacity at multiple levels. While the profession has a growing body of knowledge, the number of practitioners actively engaged in research remains limited. Strengthening research culture within TMB calls for greater access to education, mentorship, funding, and institutional support. By addressing these areas, the profession can create a more robust research community that contributes to evidence-informed practice and strengthens interprofessional collaboration.

Research education is a foundational element in capacity-building. Many TMB programs emphasize clinical training but provide little exposure to research methodology, limiting practitioners' ability to engage in scholarly inquiry. Integrating research literacy and capacity into professional education would equip students with the skills needed to critically assess studies, apply findings to practice, and contribute to knowledge generation. Beyond initial training, continuing education opportunities focused on research literacy and capacity would further support practitioners interested in engaging with research.

Mentorship plays a key role in fostering research engagement. Established researchers can support emerging scholars by providing guidance on study design, grant writing, and dissemination of findings. Structured mentorship programs, research fellowships, and peer support

networks can help practitioners navigate the complexities of conducting and publishing research. These relationships also create connections between TMB professionals and researchers from other disciplines, strengthening interprofessional collaboration in both research and practice.

Funding remains a significant barrier to expanding research participation in TMB. Limited grant opportunities and a lack of institutional support often make it difficult for practitioners to pursue research. Advocacy for dedicated research funding, collaboration with academic institutions, and partnerships with health-care organizations can help secure the resources needed to support research initiatives. Expanding funding opportunities would enable more practitioners to engage in research while also attracting new scholars to the field.

Institutional support is essential for sustaining research engagement. Stronger ties between health professional associations, TMB organizations, academic institutions, and health-care systems can facilitate research collaborations, increase access to research infrastructure, and provide platforms for knowledge exchange. Creating research-focused positions within TMB education and practice settings would further reinforce the profession's commitment to scholarly inquiry and interprofessional engagement.

Building capacity for research in TMB is an investment in the profession's future. Strengthening education, mentorship, funding, and institutional support will create new opportunities for practitioners to engage in research and contribute to the evidence base that informs practice. By fostering a research culture within TMB, the profession can enhance its role in health care, support interprofessional collaboration, and ensure that its contributions are recognized in the broader scientific and clinical communities.

CONCLUSION

Research presents an opportunity for TMB to strengthen its role in health care by enhancing interprofessional collaboration. While research has traditionally been viewed as a tool for advancing knowledge, it also serves as a mechanism for building professional relationships, fostering

shared understanding, and integrating TMB more fully into interdisciplinary teams. By expanding research engagement, TMB practitioners can contribute to evidence-informed practice, reinforce their credibility within health-care settings, and establish a stronger presence in interprofessional collaboration.

Realizing this potential requires collaboration across organizations, institutions, and departments, which can present challenges. Differences in priorities, logistical barriers, and professional silos may make it difficult to establish meaningful partnerships across disciplines. However, progress is possible, even in small, deliberate steps. Each TMB program will have different opportunities to move this work forward. A practical starting point might be enhancing research education within existing curricula, ensuring that students develop the skills and confidence to engage with evidence-based practice. Another approach could be forging a partnership with one other health-care profession program, creating opportunities for students and faculty to collaborate in shared learning or research initiatives.

Embracing research as a pathway to interprofessional collaboration positions TMB as an essential part of integrated health care. By investing in research engagement, the profession can enhance its contributions to patient care, advocate for its role within health-care systems, and ensure that its expertise is recognized as a valuable component of interprofessional practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTIFICATION

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