

The MassageNet Revival

Join This Network & Contribute to the Future of Your Field

By Samantha Zabel, PhD(c), and Niki Munk, LMT, PhD

It is important to consider how research can be based on and ideally reflect massage practice. Where, for example, is the best place for massage research to be done? The logical response is: in the massage therapy practice.

Research into the benefits of massage therapy and how massage therapists do their work is limited by the nature of massage. For example, important components of a massage session go beyond the tissue manipulation, so it is difficult to study the practice of massage in a controlled and oftentimes sterile laboratory. This is why the massage therapy practice could be the best



place in which to conduct massage research.

The fact of the matter is researchers do not tend to conduct research in practice settings. This is why getting massage therapists involved in research can help researchers get the real-world information we know is relevant to massage practice, but difficult to collect in research studies.

Practice-based research networks (PBRNs) are one

way you as a massage practitioner, along with researchers, can connect to answer research questions directly related to practice and clients.

What is a PBRN?

A PBRN is essentially a collection of members of a common disciplinary theme who are interested in being involved in practice-reflective or practice-based research within their discipline. The engagement and participation are varied, but essentially, for massage therapy, it is a collective of massage clinicians who have indicated interest, provided information about themselves and their practice, and

indicated what kinds of research-related activities and topics interest them.

Designing research to be done in a practitioner's office helps us understand how the uncontrollable plays into the results of an intervention, which may better reflect its effectiveness.

The first PBRNs came about in the 1970s in primary care medicine.¹ Since then, PBRNs have emerged as an integral part of practical research in virtually every health care-related discipline, including dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and complementary and integrative health. Regardless of discipline, all PBRNs share the common goal of improving quality and delivery of care through clinician-involved research.

Clinicians, including massage therapists, may have limited access to people or organizations that provide support required to do research. Research can be expensive, and without the right training it can be hard to design research projects of high enough quality to go through peer review or demonstrate reliable and valid outcomes.

PBRNs can narrow the gap between practice and research by making participating in and conducting research more

1 Hickner, J, Green, LA. "Practice-based Research Networks (PBRNs) in the United States: Growing and Still Going After All These Years." The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine, 2015 28(5), 541. Retrieved from jabfm.org/content/28/5/541.abstract.

accessible to clinicians and those who seek massage care within their practices.² Researchers working with a PBRN can help provide the infrastructure and know-how to create solid research studies, and they often use clinician input to help make research questions more applicable to practice.

Clinicians in applied disciplines often report that research does not address the needs of their practices or clients³, particularly in the massage therapy field.⁴ Researchers may design projects around questions they think are important, but which are not really the questions clinicians want answered or that apply to real-world practice or clients. A PBRN allows for input from its members, focusing on questions that directly impact the treatment of clients or practice operations.

PBRNs are compatible with a variety of research questions and designs.⁵ Studies can examine clinical decision support, treatment of conditions and symptoms, clinical systems and other questions that impact practice and clients. The practice environment

provides the opportunity to explore how things happen in real life and can lead to improvements in quality of care as well as education for clinicians and clients.

PBRNs and Massage Research

A review of massage-related research coming out of PBRNs found that research products have been increasing since 2005.⁶ Most of this research was done by PBRNs focused on complementary and integrative health as a whole, with massage as a small component.

Two PBRNs focused specifically on massage therapy, Massage Northern Ohio-PBRN and MassageNet. These networks have produced several studies, including studies about medical referrals to massage therapy, client perceptions of massage, and massage provider collection of health history. Most of the massage-focused works utilized surveys, but PBRNs have the potential to facilitate high-level research studies like randomized controlled trials.

Massage Research through MassageNet

Encouraging highly trained researchers to be involved in massage PBRNs can help push the growth of real-world research in massage therapy, and MassageNet is among the first.

MassageNet launched in 2009 with funding from the Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF). The first few years saw membership grow to about 500 massage therapists and allies. After about 2015, however, MassageNet went dormant after a change to the founding organization's mission and structure. MassageNet's membership continued to grow slowly, but without the needed administrative support, no research activity or member engagement occurred.

In 2019, the MTF began discussion of the revitalization of MassageNet in recognition that there was an increasing need for practitioner-powered research, and that MassageNet's existing foundation provided a solid base upon which to cultivate needed massage-focused research

infrastructure. Efforts to revise MassageNet began in earnest by early 2021 with an official rollout planned to correspond with the 2022 International Massage Therapy Research Conference held in Alexandria, Virginia.

The relaunch began with an invitation to the original 500 members for re-enrollment, with about 70 people confirming they wanted to be part of the new MassageNet. A new enrollment survey was drafted and tested in early 2022 with the help of the continuing membership, alongside new policies and other administrative documents.

The 2022 revival of MassageNet follows the vision of creating a nurturing space where massage-focused clinicians, students, educators and researchers develop collaborative research projects and educational resources that directly impact and reflect everyday massage practice.

Through MassageNet, MTF plans for plentiful opportunities for members to engage with PBRN activities as much or as little as they want. MassageNet's PBRN

- 2 Crooke PJ, Olswang LB. "Practice-Based Research: Another Pathway for Closing the Research-Practice Gap." *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*. 2015; 58(6), S1871-S1882. Retrieved from https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2015_JSLHR-L-15-0243.
- 3 Leach MJ, Tucker B. "Current Understandings of the Research-Practice Gap from the Viewpoint of Complementary Medicine Academics: A Mixed-Method Investigation." *Explore*. 2017; 13(1), 53-61. Retrieved from [sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550830716301641?via%3Dihub](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550830716301641?via%3Dihub).
- 4 Baskwill A., Sumpton B., Shipwright S., Atack L., Maher J. "A Canadian Massage Therapy Education Environmental Scan." *International Journal of Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork*. 2020; 13(4), 12-24.
- 5 "Primary Care Practice-Based Research Networks. 2012," October 2018. Retrieved from ahrq.gov/research/findings/factsheets/primary/pbrn/index.html.
- 6 Zabel S, Munk N. "Practice-Based Research Networks and Massage Therapy: A Scoping Review." *International Journal of Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork*. 2020; 13(4), 25-34. Retrieved from ijtmb.org/index.php/ijtmb/article/view/535.

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structure will provide processes through which members may participate in survey studies about themselves or their practices, recruit their clients for research projects, and provide treatments or interventions as part of a research protocol.

Once MassageNet is fully established, it is planned for members to have the opportunity to become involved in research design projects alongside trained researchers. In the meantime, educational modules are in development to help MassageNet members learn more about such topics as research methods and design, writing for scientific publication, and research grants.

These member-supportive efforts are planned and developed with the intention to nurture research literacy and cultivate a shared knowledge base among practice-based research

collaborators. All these efforts and opportunities are provided by MTF through MassageNet for free to those who choose to be members.

In the Works

PBRNs take time to develop,^{7,8,9,10} and MassageNet is expected to grow over the next several years along with provided opportunities based on member needs and inquiries. MassageNet is currently looking forward to starting a variety of exciting projects and all massage therapists, students and allies are encouraged to participate and get in on the ground floor to be eligible for these initial opportunities.

To enroll, go to massagenet.org and sign up. Notifications for research participation opportunities will be circulated to members through MassageNet infrastructure once projects receive final IRB and PBRN approval. MassageNet is already

- 7 DeVoe JE, Likumahuw S, Eiff MP, Nelson CA, Carroll JE, Hill CN, Kullberg PA. "Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead: Report from the OCHIN Safety Net West Practice-based Research Network (PBRN)." *The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. 2012; 25(5), 560-564. Retrieved from pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22956690.
- 8 Hayes, H, Burge, S. "Creating A Practice-Based Research Network from Scratch: Where Do I Begin?" *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*. 2012; 6(3), 369-380. Retrieved from <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/484086>.
- 9 Mulhall, A. (2001). "Bridging the Research-Practice Gap: Breaking New Ground in Health Care." *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*. 2001; 7(8), 389-394. Retrieved from <https://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/abs/10.12968/ijpn.2001.7.8.9010>.
- 10 Snyder, M. E., Frail, C. K., Seel, L. V., & Hultgren, K. E. (2012). "Experience Developing a Community Pharmacy Practice-based Research Network." *Innovations in Pharmacy*. 2012; 3(2), Article 78. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4090306/>.

What the MTF Does for You

The Massage Therapy Foundation is a 501(c)3 providing support to the massage therapy profession. Since 1990, MTF has provided over \$1 million in research grants studying the science behind therapeutic massage.

MTF founded and publishes an open-access, peer-reviewed scientific journal and provides many educational resources for massage therapists, educators and students. MTF also provides community service grants to populations in need of therapeutic massage who would otherwise lack access.

Learn more, donate, or apply for a community service grant at massagetherapyfoundation.org.

fostering member involvement in research, with massage-focused researchers currently inquiring about conducting research studies.

There are studies recruiting now, and others are forthcoming. Two of these initial MassageNet studies are being conducted by master's

and doctoral research students. MassageNet is proud to help nurture future massage-focused researchers.

MassageNet has other developments in the works in addition to the upcoming research opportunities. A descriptive paper about the first year's

membership enrollment is planned for publication in 2023 and will provide an in-depth look at how MassageNet's revamp was conceptualized and realized. It is hoped that this initial paper will help provide a foundation for other massage- and integrative-health-focused PBRNs to build upon as more networks are created to advance the research base.

Be Part of Future Research

The future of massage research is at hand. MassageNet and other PBRNs focusing on CIH research will help push massage therapy forward, and you can be part of this exciting step. If you are interested in learning more about research and how you can be involved, visit

massagenet.org to learn more and sign up. **M**

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Read "Your 3-Step Guide to Start Reading Research Papers," by Corey Rivera, on massagemag.com.

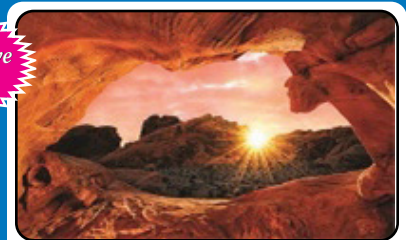


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