



## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **PHYSICIAN REFERRALS FOR EXTENDED HEALTH BENEFIT PLANS**

**On December 2, 2006, the Board of Directors reviewed the issue of insurance companies requiring a physician referral for persons insured under extended health benefit plans to obtain a referral from a physician in order to access massage therapy services. The Board approved the following Position Statement:**

The RMTAO calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health and Long Term Care to prohibit insurance companies from requiring a referral from a physician to a Massage Therapist before paying the benefits to the insured. The RMTAO believes that:

- Notwithstanding the independent nature of the insurance industry to set its own rules, these rules should not be permitted to alter the rules established in the government's legislative framework governing the health professions;
- Under the Regulated Health Professions Act, Massage Therapists are considered primary health care professionals who are well trained to treat within their scope of practice and to refer patients with conditions that are beyond their scope to other health practitioners and access to the services of a Massage Therapist does not require a physician referral;
- The visit to the physician, which is often unnecessary is paid for under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) which places an unnecessary financial burden on the health care system and the Government of Ontario or in some circumstances,
- The referral requirement acts as a deterrent to accessing the services of a Massage Therapist as many Ontarians do not feel it is necessary to visit a physician when they can clearly identify that the services of an RMT are the services that will best meet their needs and therefore do not seek the physician referral.

#### **Background**

There is an increasing trend by insurance companies offering Extended Health Benefit Plans (EHBPs) to impose a requirement that in order to access the services of a Massage Therapist under an Extended Health Benefit plan, a referral from a physician is required.

In some cases, the visit to the physician is medically unnecessary; however, if the insured person

wishes to access their benefits for massage therapy, they are required to see their physician. This visit is paid for under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) and not by insurance companies. This adds an unnecessary financial burden to the OHIP.

In some cases, the insured person does not feel the need to visit their physician and will instead choose not to seek the services of a Massage Therapist at all, thus being denied access to treatment.

Massage Therapists are primary care health practitioners who are well trained to treat patients within the scope of massage therapy (defined by the Massage Therapy Act, 1991) and to refer patients who present themselves with conditions beyond the scope of practice of Massage Therapists to other health care practitioners.

While there are no specific legislative references to be used to support the idea, it is a commonly accepted principle among the health professions (Associations and Regulatory Colleges) that all health professions are equal under the RHPA and that no one profession controls access to any of the others. In a Compendium to the Health Services Improvement Act, 2006, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care indicated that the

“Ontario legislative framework for regulated health professions is not intended to judge or compare the value of one health profession over another or test the theory of certain health care practitioners over others. Through the legislative scheme, the public is protected and informed consumer choice facilitated by assuring the public that regulated health care practitioners are qualified to practice in their particular profession and, in the event of complaints, abuse or harm, recourse is available through the College’s complaints and discipline system”.<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that access to some professionals within professions is controlled under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, i.e. physician specialists’ fees are only paid when referred by a General Practitioner.

By requiring a physician referral, insurance companies are interfering with the freedom of Ontarians to choose the health practitioner best suited for the health challenges that they face.

The RMTAO Board of Directors adopted this position statement on December 3, 2006.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Compendium, Health Systems Improvements Act, 2006, December 2006, p. 53