



# How to Connect with a **Researcher**

Written by:  
*Ruth Werner*

## So you wanna work in research...

*“Dear Massage Therapy Foundation: I have developed an amazing technique for \_\_\_\_\_ (Parkinson’s disease, frozen shoulder, wandering spleen). How do I do the research to prove it?”*

*“Dear Massage Therapy Foundation: I really, really want to participate in a research project. How can I find one near me?”*

We get a lot of questions like these in the Massage Therapy Foundation letter bag. It is exciting to know that many people in our developing field want to get involved in scientific research about their craft. At the same time it can be challenging, for a couple of reasons:

- ▶ *Compared to most health care interventions, massage therapy is under-researched, and it can be hard to find ongoing projects; and*
- ▶ *Most massage therapists have little or no formal training in research methodology or capacity. This makes them less-than-ready to get involved in running or designing research projects.*

## PUBLISH OR PERISH

The end-game for all research projects is to get into publication. Even studies with null (insignificant effect) findings are important to get into the public record, because they add to the general knowledge of our craft. If people work individually with clients and get surprising results (good, bad or indifferent) but don't share that knowledge, it dies in the session room—no one else gets to benefit. But case reports and research projects that are published live in the literature forever, and are available to massage therapists and other health care providers around the globe. So this E-book will focus on what it takes for massage therapists to get involved with projects that have the ultimate goal of getting published and adding to our profession's evidence base.



## SOME BACKGROUND VOCABULARY

I have no idea who will read this and what level of expertise you already have, so I will include a few definitions that might seem elementary for some, but very welcome to others:

Case Report: This is a written description of what happens with a single patient or client in a clinical setting. It is not an experiment: it is an observation of real-life clinical practice, written in the same format that every scientist uses. Case reports don't require IRB approval (see below for a definition of IRB), but experiments do. Written

case reports often provide scientists with information they need to understand massage, and to create larger-scale projects.

IRB: This stands for Institutional Review Board. Many academic institutions have an IRB whose job is to review research proposals for ethical considerations. Even for massage research, which is relatively low-risk, having IRB approval for anything more complex than a case report is critical. Projects conducted without IRB approval are essentially unregulated human experimentation, and they are virtually unpublishable.

PBRN: This stands for practice-based research network. It is a group of clinicians recruited by researchers (also called investigators) who want to collect data from multiple individuals, often via surveys or questionnaires. PBRNs are a cost-effective way to gather information across great geographical diversity.

PI: “Molly Massage, PI”—no, it doesn’t stand for Private Investigator; it stands for Principal Investigator—that is, the person who is in charge of the project. The PI is responsible for the final design and execution of the project, and his or her name typically appears at the front of the list of authors when it gets published.

PubMed: This is the world’s largest database of academic peer-reviewed journals in the life sciences. Use the search function at [pubmed.gov](http://pubmed.gov) to look for massage therapy research in the context of topics that interest you, like “massage therapy and pain” or “massage therapy and fibromyalgia”.

## THE RESEARCH WORLD NEEDS YOU!

It is vital that massage therapists be ready and willing to step up to the research challenge; otherwise we end up with research that doesn't reflect massage therapy as practiced and, not surprisingly, results that don't seem to reflect what we see in clinical practice. There is definitely a place for research about massage administered by non-massage therapists (parents working with their children, loved ones working with their partners, etc.), but that fills a different information vacuum. For findings that speak directly to our profession, we need credentialed massage therapists using protocols that are as similar as possible to what is typically done in a real-life setting. And the only way this can happen is if we have a cadre of massage therapists who can participate and consult in this kind of research.

## WHICH IS YOUR PATH?

In a fairly simplistic analysis, there are only a few ways to get involved in massage therapy research. Your first job is to figure out which one is the right path for you.

### **Pathway 1**

Be a massage therapist on a research team. This means someone else is the PI, and you are the representative of massage therapy practice. A member of the team doesn't need advanced research literacy skills at the outset, but he or she must be able and willing to stick to the boundaries of an established protocol (which—in good projects—has been developed by an experienced and skilled massage therapist).

It is not uncommon for someone to enter the field in this setting, and then go on to be helpful in other ways—learning how to write grants, how to do literature reviews,

or participating in the writing process are all possibilities for enthusiastic and motivated participants.

### **Pathway 2**

Help to run the research. This means that you, probably with a partner who has an academic affiliation, design the research project. This requires a lot of background education in statistics, research design and methodology. Ultimately, if you see yourself in this position, it will be worthwhile to work for a Master's Degree, and possibly a Doctorate in a field that interests you. Unfortunately we do not yet have higher education options specifically in massage therapy in the United States, so it is necessary to come to this from another direction. Some PhDs who study massage therapy got their Doctorates in psychology, nursing, public health, sports medicine, or epidemiology— it's up to you to choose the field that lets you pursue your passion.

### **Pathway 3**

Secure your own funding. Let's say you have a great idea, and access to substantial funds-- \$50,000 or so. Maybe you have a wealthy client who is grateful because you helped her carpal tunnel syndrome, so she wants to help you do a pilot study on your protocol. With funds in hand, even an inexperienced researcher can attract the attention of professional researchers who are looking for their next project.

### **WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?**

To compile this E-book I consulted with several people involved in massage therapy research to get their input. They are listed, with great appreciation, at the end of the

document. I asked these contributors a few questions about collaborating with massage therapists, and here are some of their answers:

***What skills are absolutely critical for potential MT collaborators to have before they contact you?***

KB: Professionalism, good listening and follow-through skills, some research literacy with an understanding of their limitations and strengths.

CM: Most non-researchers make many erroneous assumptions, including how much time, money, and expertise it takes to do a study. They may also think that the purpose of undertaking a study is to prove something they already know to be true. They should not assume that their ideas are good from a scientific standpoint, or that their idea is going to be of interest to a particular researcher.

AP: Be a massage therapist—that's what I *don't* know. They need to be willing and open to the idea of following a protocol. It's a potential limitation and concern. We manualize our protocol that leaves a level of flexibility, but there are certain restrictions that an MT can and can't do in this setting.

***If you were to hear from an MT who has a great research idea, what would prompt you to follow up with that person?***

CM: I'll follow up with anyone who contacts me. Whether I go further than that depends on what other things I'm working on and whether that person seems like they are someone who would be valuable and rewarding to work with.

GB: The therapist should come with a minimum of a BA or BS in a science related to their area of interest, and they should come with funding or a pledge for funding, including payment for my time.

AP: You have to realize that if you're coming to someone like me, you have to be open to the fact that your idea may not be the one that gets followed. Research is difficult and expensive, although massage therapy isn't as expensive as some other things. People who haven't done research have no concept how hard it is to do it. It's a lot more involved than people often realize. For a researcher, you have to support yourself—it's challenging if there's not funding. It's great if you have a potential patient who wants to fund a pilot study—that moves you to the head of the line.

***What should MTs specifically NOT do when trying to create a connection with a researcher?***

KB: Communication should be professional—this is more than a text message. MTs should not insult research (I have some stories, but I'll spare you). I do research because I love it, not because it pays well. Some respect for my chosen career is appreciated—especially if you want to get involved!

AP: Don't take things personally. You have to appreciate how busy people in academia are. I make a particular effort not to be dismissive of people, but it's not personal if a researcher doesn't have time to investigate your magic protocol.

EL: Don't push your own agenda. Get involved, become valuable, then introduce your ideas for research later.

**WAYS TO GET INVOLVED...**

**Dr. Jerrilyn Cambron** is a Professor in the Department of Research at the National University of Health Sciences in Lombard, IL, and adjunct faculty in the Epidemiolo-



gy and Biostatistics Division of the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has been the PI on studies in massage therapy and chiropractic for more than 20 years, working with both public and private funding. She is the founder and PI at MassageNet, a practice-based research network for massage therapists. Dr. Cambron is also the President-Elect of the Massage Therapy Foundation.

In 2012 Dr. Cambron led a panel at the AMTA National Convention on helping massage therapists find their way into research projects. The following is based on her list of recommendations:

### **Start writing case reports**

The case report is a good way for therapists and students to describe outcomes in clinical practice. Consider participating in the Student or Practitioner Case Report Contest offered through the Massage Therapy Foundation. You could also submit your case report to CaseRe3: an international database of case reports from CAM therapies, found here:

<http://www.massageresearchonline.com:8080/xmlui/>

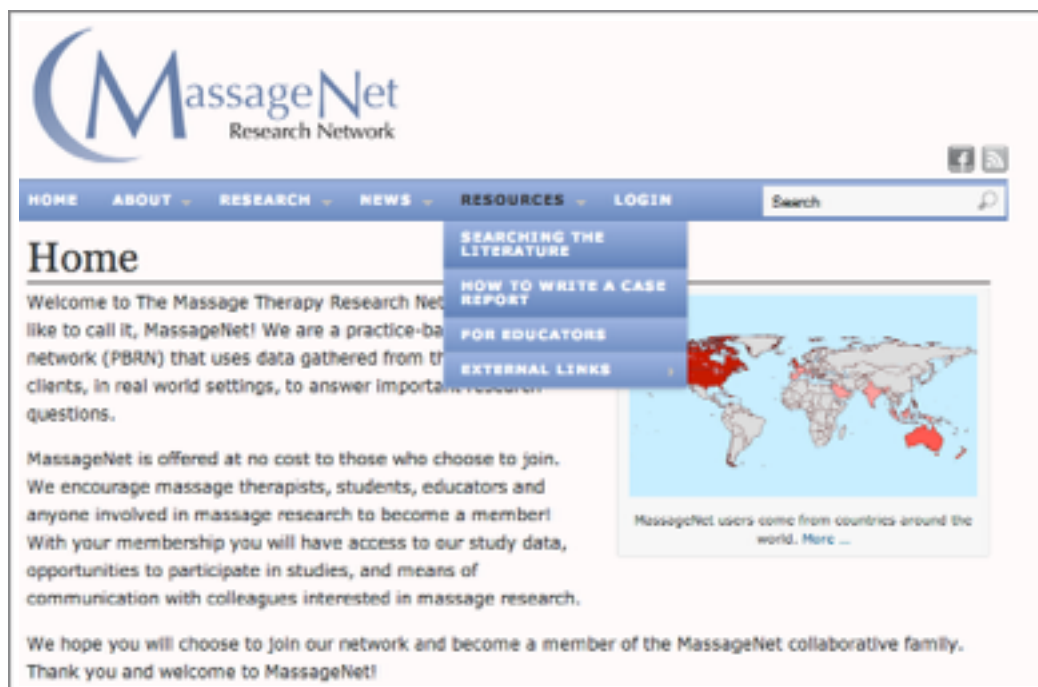
### **Start doing research at your school**

Not all schools are set up to allow research. But if your school has an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Research Ethics Committee, talk to the IRB chair about your research plans. They may have resources or personnel available to help you develop your research project. If your school does not have an IRB, you'll need to find

another school that does. It is against federal regulations to do experimental research without ethical oversight.

### **Join a practice-based research network**

Practice-based research networks (PBRNs) are groups set up by researchers with the specific intent of gathering data from many clinicians. MassageNet (massage.net.org) is a PBRN created specifically for massage therapists that you can join for free, but others exist to focus on other issues. Typically the researchers will develop the research questions and surveys; however, if you have a research idea for your PBRN, be sure to contact the investigators.



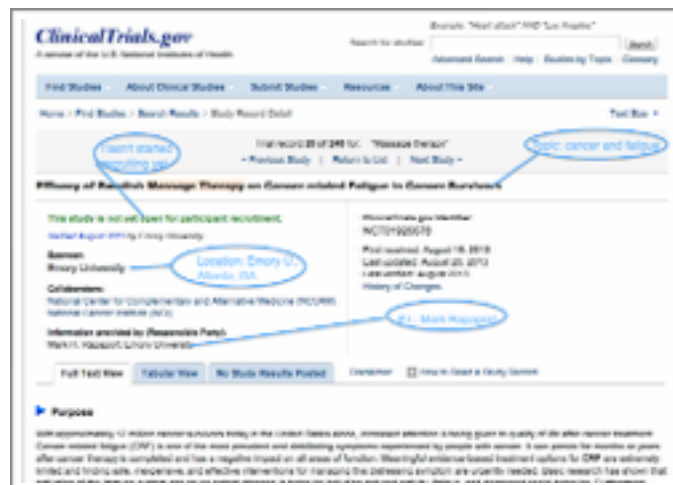
<http://www.massagenet.org>

## ***Find investigators in your area, or with your interests***

Lots of researchers are interested in manual therapies. One way to find them is to search PubMed ([www.pubmed.gov](http://www.pubmed.gov)) for articles on your favorite topics. At the top of each PubMed abstract is a link to information about the investigator's institution and an email address for the contact person on the project. Not all researchers will be interested in collaborating with novice investigators, so be prepared to describe how you could benefit the researcher. Experience in massage protocol development or knowledge of unique procedures might help you in this conversation.



Another resource for finding researchers with your interests is Clinicaltrials.gov. This is a comprehensive list of all ongoing clinical trials and their principal investigators.



## **Attend Research Conferences**

The *International Massage Therapy Research Conference* happens every 3 years; the next one is in 2016. The *International Fascia Research Congress* can be accessed through their website at [www.fasciacongress.org](http://www.fasciacongress.org). The *International Congress for Clinicians in Complementary and Integrative Medicine* (ICC-CIM) will meet in Miami, FL in May of 2014 (<http://www.imconsortium.org/>). As you begin to investigate topics that interest you, you may find conferences as well. These meetings aren't just a way to gain knowledge; they are irreplaceable opportunities to meet researchers who are interested in the same things you're interested in.

## **Pursue an advanced degree**

Getting a graduate degree (Master's or Doctorate) is a good way to learn how to do research in your area of interest. All graduate students are expected to complete a thesis or capstone project, providing practical experience in research methods. While this is not an option for everyone, you may want to include it in your long-term plans if you are serious about a research career. Further, educational expenses that help you grow your career are tax-deductible.



## **FROM MASSAGE THERAPIST-RESEARCHERS**

Erika Larson and Susan Chapelle are two massage therapists who have successfully created working relationships with professional researchers.

**Erika Larson** is a massage therapist in Atlanta, Georgia. She works in an orthotics and prosthetics department, and has a special interest in working with people who have had amputations. She won the 2008 Massage Therapy Foundation Practitioner Case Report Contest with a report on one such client. She is also the lead massage therapist with Dr. Mark Rapaport's research team at Emory University. She made that happen by staying in touch with her massage school, which has a connection to Emory. When Dr. Rapaport, who pioneered some massage research in California, transferred to Georgia, Erika went to hear him deliver a lecture. They connected, and exchanged business cards. Then when he began looking for massage therapists for his next study, he reached out to her massage school for referrals. Her research background made her a natural fit for the lead person on his team.

Erika has found that her massage team has learned a lot about research through their work together, and their regular meetings with the other scientists have made them much more confident about their valuable opinions. She strongly recommends that anyone who wants to begin in a setting like this take the **Basics of Research Literacy** class.

Erika's final thoughts on the subject:

*Someone getting started in research needs to not be discouraged by 'no'. The research world is a lot of hurry-up-and-wait. If there is something that you really want to see happen, you will have to be persistent. Realize that for ideas with merit, 'no' often means 'not yet'. Being that small, persistent (but respectful) voice can eventually pay off.*

**Susan Chappelle** is a Registered Massage Therapist in Vancouver, BC. She has a long-time interest in massage for scar tissue restrictions, but her early efforts to

create self-led research projects ended in failure, largely because she was not working with a professional researcher, and she couldn't negotiate many of the technical and ethical issues on her own.

In 2009 she went to the second International Fascia Research Congress in Amsterdam, and there she found Dr. Geoffrey Bove. They shared some opinions about innervation and fascial injury, so they explored possible joint research topics. Eventually Dr. Bove and Susan began a mostly self-funded pilot study using rats to test whether massage could limit scar tissue development after abdominal surgery. This was successful, and based on their initial project, the team has just received the first NIH grant from the Medical Sciences Institute for a massage therapy project to continue this line of inquiry.

Susan's advice to new researchers:

*Attend research conferences, and be prepared: identify the speakers who interest you, and read their articles ahead of time. That way you can talk to them intelligently about their work. Be willing to read research that is not just about massage. Sometime cross-disciplinary literature has a lot to teach us. And don't try to go it alone; find a partner who knows what you don't know.*

## OTHER RESOURCES

A number of resources are available for massage therapists who want to dip their toes in the research ocean.

- ▶ *Case Report Webinars: The Massage Therapy Foundation made a series of five 1-hour webinars on writing case reports; these are now available for free on the Massage Therapy Foundation website.*
- ▶ *Research Roundup: The American Massage Therapy Association regularly posts a "Research Round-up": a list and description of recently published articles that are of particular interest. Find it here: <http://www.amtamassage.org/uploads/cms/documents/massage-therapy-rounduplr.pdf>*
- ▶ *Research Track at AMTA National: Every year the AMTA National Convention hosts an educational track about research, including a panel of professional researchers discussing their work. What an easy, convenient way to be introduced to this world!*
- ▶ *E-mail alerts: Why not have articles delivered to you automatically? Both Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)) and Pubmed ([pubmed.gov](http://pubmed.gov)) offer e-mail alert services. You can visit these sites and arrange to have automatic e-mail alerts when any article with your chosen keywords is published.*
- ▶ *Click here for a quick tutorial in setting up e-mail alerts from Pubmed.gov: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/viewlet/myncbi/jourup.html>*
- ▶ *Basics of Research Literacy (BRL): This is an online self-paced course offered by Education and Training Solutions, in partnership with the Massage Therapy Foundation. It is a skills-building experience that will significantly increase your competence in the research world. The BRL class merits 9 hours of approved continuing education in research for the NCBTMB. Register for BRL here: <http://www.educationtrainingsolutions.com/massage-therapy-foundation/>*



I hope this little E-book has been helpful to you, and maybe given you some ideas for how you can be part of the future of the massage therapy profession by adding your valuable presence to the research community. I look forward to seeing you here!

Ruth Werner

Waldport, OR

2013

Special thanks to all the people who helped me put this project together:

Karen Boulanger, PhD, CMT

Geoffrey Bove, DC, PhD

Jerrilyn Cambron, LMT, DC, MPH, PhD

Susan Chappelle, RMT

Jessica N. Ferrer, LMT

Bodhi Haraldsson, RMT

Erika Larson, LMT

Christopher A. Moyer, PhD

Adam I. Perlman, MD, MPH



## About The Massage Therapy Foundation

The Massage Therapy Foundation was founded by AMTA in 1990 with the mission of bringing the benefits of massage therapy to the broadest spectrum of society through the generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge in this field. We do this by receiving donations and granting funds for research, community service, educational initiatives, and conferences. We also do this by providing direct consultation to the medical and research communities, and by educating massage therapists about the world of research.



Learn more about the Massage Therapy Foundation at [www.massagetherapyfoundation.org](http://www.massagetherapyfoundation.org).

To support e-books and other work by the Massage Therapy Foundation, please consider making a [donation](#).

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