



Insights from Perinatal MT Employees

an online resource
created to accompany

Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy:

A Comprehensive Guide to Prenatal, Labor and Postpartum Practice
(Third Edition)

Carole Osborne

Michele Kolakowski

David M Lobenstine

(Handspring Publishing Ltd. 2021)

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Insights from Perinatal MT Employees & Employers

Introduction

When you are in private practice, all the marketing and business concerns covered in Chapter Eight are in your hands; that's the beautiful and the ugly side of being your own boss. Perhaps you prefer to have someone else responsible for creating the business so your hands can focus more on doing the work you love. If so, then you may want to seek employment at a business that appreciates your interest in childbearing people.

In recent decades, employment opportunities have opened dramatically in day, resort, and destination spas as well as in medical spa settings. Many hospitals have established adjunctive clinics where maternity massage services are amongst the most popular; some hospitals bring massage therapy directly to their patients by hiring staff massage therapists (see "Hospital Based Postnatal Massage Therapy" pdf with Chapter 6's online resources). Wellness centers offer you the opportunity to work with other compatible providers of preventive and healthcare support. Some of these wellness centers cater almost exclusively to women's needs, particularly around childbearing. In several US cities, there are maternity massage centers employing groups of massage therapists to work with their clients. The experiences of several therapists in the work settings above are shared later in this document. See Chapter 8 and other online documents with this chapter for other stories of therapists working in these settings as they share the logistics, as well as some of the joys and challenges of these environments.



Educational Foundations

When you have advanced training in maternity massage therapy, you are more likely to land one of these jobs. Sometimes employers are just pleasantly surprised to find you have this knowledge base; others will hire only those with certification and experience in the perinatal field. Look into the variety of training available, from home study and short courses of 4-7 hours to 32-75 hours in intensive specialization programs. Compare curriculum, structure and philosophy to find one that best suits your needs. Some courses are exclusively medically oriented, and others more relaxation or spiritually focused. Make sure that the course you take at least minimally meets your target employer's requirements in length, scope and viewpoint. (See Chapter 2 online document entitled "Maternity Massage Training Opportunities.")

Carefully consider the depth of knowledge achievable in the hours included to see if it matches your educational goals. Seven to 14 hours is about the minimum in which an instructor can cover basic prenatal physiology, safety issues, contraindications, positioning, and a few simple techniques. Be wary of a course that tries to cover prenatal, labor and postpartum work in a day, unless you are only looking for a brief overview of the field. If you aren't intending to develop a specialization practice, then you probably don't need 75 or more hours. If you want to work in a medical setting such as an obstetrician's office or a hospital, seek a more comprehensive education. Some facilities require a degree, and even a nursing credential in addition to your massage therapy training to join their staff.

Some employees find that they can improve their job security by becoming the maternity staff expert at their facility. Whenever this therapist is on the schedule, prenatal bookings go to her or him. Their



employers will likely consider retaining them for their valuable knowledge if reduced hours or layoffs become necessary. Ascending to this position of authority can be a lengthy process, involving not only advanced maternity massage therapy training, but also other in-depth courses such as childbirth education or infant massage instructor courses. Those who do go the distance on this level of training usually enjoy the respect of their colleagues and a more stable job situation.

Mastering Communications with Management and Co-Workers

One aspect of employment that many prenatal massage therapists find frustrating is coordination and communications. This is especially true where guests/clients see different therapists for return visits. Given the range of guidelines and techniques (see each Chapter's and the online Points of View discussions for some of these controversies and myths), policies, positioning and treatment procedures can range widely between therapists. Intake forms and time to take an adequate health and perinatal history may be so limited that providing quality care becomes compromised. Standardized record keeping may be incomplete and inappropriate for prenatal and postpartum sessions. You may not feel ready to work with high-risk or complicated pregnancies, but your employer demands it. At some spas any therapist, regardless of how minimal their perinatal training, can be expected to perform prenatal massages. Perhaps that is the reason you are reading this book!

The design of many spa, chiropractic, and medical treatment rooms and equipment are ill suited for pregnant patients/guests to receive massage therapy. Tiny rooms are difficult for rounded bellies to navigate gracefully and comfortably in. If a treatment table is less than 27 inches wide, it can be extremely difficult to adequately bolster for sidelying work. Some facilities are woefully lacking the cushioning systems and/or pillows necessary for comfortable positioning, or you must frantically



gather enough from multiple locations. And where in the small room do you store your supports if you do have them? If you work in guests' rooms, then toting everything is a task for a pack animal. Strong smells of spa treatment products may be an issue with sensitive pregnant noses.

All these situations will require your considerable communication skill and a positive respectful attitude to resolve. Ask for a conversation with your immediate manager to address your concerns. Be prepared to back up any recommendations or changes that you propose with solid information and any available research. Look to problem solve rather than blame or judge.

Individuality in a Corporate or Medical Environment

One other business aspect of employment in spas and medical settings bears mentioning. Some therapists struggle with maintaining their own sense of themselves as a person and a therapist in these settings. The “branded” image and culture of a luxury spa or a wellness center can feel stifling to individuality with its uniformity in dress, behaviors, policy and session design. The physician controls a medical setting, and that can be not only the policies, but prescribing specific areas and type of work you will do in your sessions. Your documentation must meet medical standards of assessment, treatment plans and ongoing identification of progress.

The wonderful advantage of this uniformity is the team spirit, camaraderie, and collegial interaction these settings offer. You can grow personally and professionally in leaps and bounds as you collaborate with other providers for superior care for your patients/clients. In some obstetrical practices or hospitals, you may be more likely to enjoy the journey of entire pregnancies, as well as the postpartum



transformations, when your patients have insurance coverage that helps secure session frequency.

Some Therapists' Stories

Intake in the Spa Setting

The receptionist at my spa job booked a “regular” client for deep tissue massage with me. I had never worked with this short, heavysset woman, and I didn't want to assume, but I found out she was 32 weeks pregnant during my intake. She came in complaining of low back pain in the S/I area. I began to question her thoroughly, much to her dislike, but I didn't allow her to push me around. This was a second pregnancy, and she was telling me that there were risks of eclampsia, although her blood pressure was under control and her doctor said massage would be great for her (no written clearance, but she agreed to get it for future sessions), and her age also was a risk factor.

She reported that she has had regular massage and most recently received a massage at another spa while on her abdomen. I shared with her information about my training and my concerns for positioning on the abdomen. I explained some of the positioning and practice contraindications and decided to proceed with the session in sidelying but modify my treatment for her high-risk conditions I was aware of.

After the session began, she told me that she had recently been placed on “bed-rest.” Luckily, I had not begun to work her legs yet! She then explained that it really was she had just been under a lot of stress having recently lost her mother, and this was a way to “get off work.” I doubted that she'd been terribly underactive, but I still focused the session on her hips, torso and neck. She was accustomed to deep tissue and found great relief from my sculpting to the quadratus lumborum, gluteals, lateral rotators and the S/I traction and rocking decompressions. She also fell asleep on the table at one point! All in all,



I believe I satisfied her as a customer, but for me it was a good lesson in a thorough intake and sticking to my protocols and guidelines, even if the client has other ideas!

Sally Roach LMT, NCTMB, Peoria, IL

My Prenatal Work in a Spa

I had the good fortune to work at a beautiful, upscale day spa in Manhattan for three years. I split my time among the spa, a more medically focused wellness center, and my own private practice. At each space I had the honor of seeing pre- and perinatal clients.

Working with pregnant clients in the spa setting poses unique challenges, as well as – I believe – unique opportunities. As an assistant teacher in pre- and perinatal massage certification workshops, students often asked about how to manage pregnancy massage in a spa. Participants raised the question with a combination of trepidation and frustration. For many of us massage therapists, the spa is a double-edged sword. The spa can offer a more reliable income than a private practice; it can also be a factory full of rules, stifling to our individual visions of bodywork. Though my experience is limited to New York City, I think some variation of this spa dilemma is true most everywhere. I know I am not alone in occasionally feeling resentful of the spa where I worked, as it afforded me the opportunity to make decent money and simultaneously reminded me that I am merely a cog in their machine.

Working with the unique needs of pregnant clients can make the spa setting even more frustrating. Like many spas, my place of employment used to forbid us from working on pregnant clients while in their first trimester. From what we now know, thanks to pioneers in the bodywork field, such a restriction is ridiculous for most people seeking massage



therapy if therapists are professionally trained. With proper training and awareness, the potential good we can do far outweighs the exaggerated risks of causing miscarriage or somehow harming the fetus.

Nevertheless, fear is a powerful influence. Management worried that the spa could be sued if anything happened to a client, even if the problem had nothing to do with the massage she received. The fear of our litigious society, and of bad publicity, often outweighs a more rational approach to treatment.

However, there is a new manager now for the massage therapists, and, on his own, he decided to alter the rule. Therapists can now work on pregnant clients in the first trimester if they agree to sign a medical release form. The knows of the minimal risk to the fetus, but also says he must account for our “sue-happy” society: the release form is a way to balance both. He also believes that part of the reason why so many spas forbid first-trimester work is the curriculum at massage schools. In his experience, so many therapists graduate with fear about potential damage that they refuse to work with first-trimester clients. To counter that, he implemented a plan where therapists can opt-out of working on pregnant clients altogether, or on pregnant clients in their first trimester, depending on their comfort. Clearly, we as massage therapists (and as educators) also bear responsibility for eliminating our fear-based approach to pregnancy. It is not yet clear how well the release form works.

Despite these difficulties around work on the first trimester, overall, my managers were surprisingly accommodating. After receiving my pre- and perinatal massage certification, I brought the textbook and course manual to the spa. Along with several other certified therapists, I explained the benefits of working in sidelying, and demonstrated why our current supply of pillows and bolsters wasn't adequate.



Management agreed to buy new supplies, and there is now an ample (and well-used) supply.

Their eagerness to help was a pleasant surprise, but also, I realized later, another key component of working at a spa. Even though they were potentially losing revenue by refusing to book people in their first trimester, management was also very aware that utilizing the expertise of me and the other therapists was an easy way for them to make money. And though as therapists we often shy away from the monetary side of the business, I believe that acknowledging fiscal realities is essential in building a mutually productive relationship with management.

Our expertise about the body is a boon to business wherever we work; knowledge of pregnancy is particularly valuable. As we all know, people can be anxious about their own pregnancies, and the mixed messages offered by the medical community (and by bodyworkers) about the potential dangers of massage only increases that anxiety. With the right training, we become an antidote to such fears. Once I explained the training and certification I had earned, the spa management was eager to utilize me and the other certified therapists. The front desk became aware of the details of those certifications, and they can mention those when talking to clients. For a client needing reassurance, just knowing that their therapist has received specialized training and had their knowledge verified can put them at ease and make them more willing to book an appointment. Management is very aware that their therapists' certifications are therefore making the spa money.

Furthermore, there were several pregnancy-related questions that have come up at the spa; management continued to seek out those of us with pre- and perinatal certification to get our opinions. Though we didn't always have the answer, or even enough training to provide an answer, we could at least guide them towards making a responsible decision.



The result was a relationship that benefited us all. The spa may still be, at heart, a moneymaking machine, but I at least had a valued place within it, and knew that I was helping it function responsibly. All of which benefited the spa's bottom line, my work as a therapist, and the client's well-being.

Because logistical details aside, the ultimate bottom line, of course, is the person on my table. At the spa, sometimes I would see one or two pregnant clients per shift, and sometimes I didn't see any for a few weeks. There was little consistency to it. At the other places I practice, I see most of my pregnant clients regularly, throughout the duration of their pregnancies. These sustained relationships, working with pregnant people as they grow into their new selves, are one of my greatest joys as a therapist.

However, the spa work offers its own, vastly different satisfactions. Often clients get a massage simply because they are at the spa for a birthday or a bachelorette party, or they received a gift certificate from their boss, or because they just want to take a break from their life. Often, our clients were not regulars. They didn't know me or any of the other therapists. And they might have had little sense of – or little interest in – the therapeutic benefits of massage.

When I first began, I took this lack of interest personally. I wanted to give each client an intense, revelatory, mind-blowing experience. But especially because of my work with pregnant clients, I have learned not to bring my own needs into the session. Our pregnant clients are already reckoning with their own mind-blowing experience, and with the demands of a new life inside them; they don't need to deal with my needs as well. With each new pregnant client, I try to assume nothing, and hope for nothing; I try to make that hour just what she wants. If that just means she takes a good nap, then that's exactly what she needed. I



believe simple relaxation can be as profound as our more advanced techniques.

But often, pregnant clients also come away from their session with something else. Typically, it is satisfied surprise. Thanks to the knowledge I now have, I have a great deal to offer each pregnant client, whatever their needs, even if it is just for one session. My spa clients were often surprised at the depth of work that we could achieve in only an hour. They were startled that we could cultivate change so quickly; they were thrilled that we could alleviate some of their rib tightness, or make their lower back feel longer, or flush some of the density from their ankles. Often, my pregnant spa clients had forgotten that they can feel this good. My hope was that I give these clients an unexpected treat. Even if they never came back, they knew that they could find well-being – even in a spa – and they knew that it is possible to feel centered – even if only for a moment – in their ever-changing bodies.

David M. Lobenstine, New York, New York

Owning and Managing a Spa

I opened Sage Spa in 2004 after 15 years in private practice as a licensed massage therapist. My practice had been a general one but with a large population of pregnant clients. Sage reflects my beginnings: probably 60% of our clients are here for relaxation and specific work on problem areas; 30-35% come for maternity massage; and 5-10% come for sports massage or touch support for medical issues like cancer. In our area of Brooklyn, New York, the demographic averages age 35, and



most of our clients are female. Our staff of 14 therapists is almost all female with one male therapist.

I have a strong interest in serving our perinatal clients, so I give much thought and preparation to hiring the best-trained maternity massage therapists, keeping them well informed and growing in their knowledge. The following outlines prominent points in my strategy to select the best perinatal therapists.

1. I've found over the years that the training of most massage school graduates is insufficient to allow them to work on pregnant clients. They need extra training, and they need the right kind of training. Based on my experience, I require every therapist who works on pregnant clients at my spa to either already have or be willing to take a specific workshop and complete certification with that instructor.
2. I also find that therapists who have earned a prenatal certification are already interested in this type of massage. It's not just that they CAN do the work; it's that they really WANT to do it. This, I hope, brings our prenatal massages to another level.
3. When a therapist first comes to work here, we review the sidelying and semi-reclining positions and what massage work is possible in each of those positions. I find most therapists are more comfortable with the sidelying position and tend to stick strictly to that unless encouraged to work in the semireclining position. Semireclining is an important option for our moms-to-be and therapists need to be comfortable with it.
4. Therapists need to practice on and learn from each other. Therapists may use rooms for exchanges at no cost to them. If someone comes up with a "great move" or technique, they can grab a room to show others.



5. If a therapist takes a useful workshop somewhere, I pay them to share an introduction to what they've learned to the Sage therapists. The workshop is free for the therapists. Massage therapists often have a passion to learn, but their lack of funds can hold them back. This helps somewhat to solve that problem.

I often bring in speakers and workshop leaders for staff advancement. Recently, realizing that many of our perinatal therapists were young and had never been pregnant, I had a childbirth educator speak to our staff about what moms' concerns might be. She offered us up-to-date information on the state of prenatal care and directed us to resources and referrals for specific mommy-concerns, e.g., doulas, childbirth counseling, VBAC etc. It's important to remember that our clients may know less than we think about what's available to them, especially if it's their first baby. It's good for the therapist to know when to refer to other professionals.

Susan Stratton, Owner of Sage Spa, Brooklyn, NY

Advanced Education

Something that has always been true is that my prenatal massage clients appreciate the education and resources that I can offer as a qualified childbirth educator. I know my community in terms of exercise and yoga classes, support groups, midwives, chiropractors and acupuncturists etc. I can explain clearly how other health modalities and areas of support will give them more comfort, energy, calm, community and confidence etc. My age is helpful also. I used to be a peer, which was good. Now I am a crone, an older, wise woman; they feel secure and supported in a different, fuller way.



In the past, I didn't really think of my practice as a business, with rather obvious results. Since I also became an esthetician, I now view my entire practice as a viable business. I have updated my materials and website, and I joined a networking group. I get Yelp referrals, and I give referral rewards. My bookkeeping is more efficient, and it has all paid off. Even in recessionary times, my income was higher! The one marketing tool that never really helped was paid advertising.

Bridget Scadeng, Berkeley, CA