

Volunteering as an Oncology Massage Therapist

For your consideration...

Background

The question of if and when to volunteer your services as an Oncology Massage Therapist is vexed. Cancer-care organisations – hospitals, clinics and wellness centres – are always looking for skilled Oncology Massage Therapists, often as unpaid volunteers.

As Oncology Massage graduates, you are almost universally independent businesses in your own right so it is a personal business decision for each of you to make. As caring human beings who have been drawn to this modality, to what extent are you there to make a difference, to what extent are you there to make a living, and how do you balance both? All we can do is provide some guidance – and that is what follows.

Considerations

National Perspective

[Volunteering Australia](#) has published the following advice surrounding the definition of volunteering under “Policy and Best Practice”.

“Volunteering should not be exploitative, or be used to replace paid employment. While volunteering provides substantial benefits to society, importantly it also provides significant benefits to the volunteers themselves. The personal benefits of volunteering need to be recognised and fostered...volunteers cannot be exploited for profit.”

Our Perspective

- One of our roles and those of our graduates are to demonstrate the value of Oncology Massage – it is not just a nice thing for volunteers to do, it is an effective treatment that improves the quality of life for people living with cancer
- You should appropriately value yourself and the services you offer – you should be paid what you are worth – we do not see other health professionals volunteer their services, so consider the reasons why an organisation is asking you to volunteer
- You are a qualified professional – you have invested in your personal and professional development – you should seek a return on that investment
- Providing service-for-free now will not necessarily lead to fee-for-service in the future – you may in fact be doing your colleagues and eventually yourself out of a livelihood
- Oncology Massage as a modality will thrive if most clients pay – it will disappear as a modality if no client pays – ipso facto, the more clients who pay, the more the modality of Oncology Massage will thrive
- If you are in a long-term open-ended volunteering relationship with a cancer-care organisation, you should benefit in a tangible way (payments, referrals, in kind contributions)

The Human Perspective

- You are a caring & compassionate human being – for many of you, Oncology Massage is a calling, not just a job
- Oncology Massage demonstrably helps people living with cancer – you want to use your skill to help people living with cancer – you want as many people living with cancer as possible to experience the benefits of Oncology Massage
- The grubby business of money and funding stands in the way of your caring human instincts

The Business Perspective

- It is not wrong to make a living out of Oncology Massage – it may be your calling but a calling does not necessarily put food on your table
- Volunteering offers lots of opportunity for the kind of trust building that can turn into a strong relationship – but humans tend to value something more when they pay for it – our clients may be more inclined to have a sub-conscious expectation that free or voluntary offerings are of lower value

The Client/Clinician/Carer Perspective

- If Oncology Massage is free, maybe it is not worth paying for?
- If Oncology Massage is not worth paying for, why would I refer a patient to an Oncology Massage Therapist?
- If Oncology Massage is not worth paying for, why would I encourage a loved one to see an Oncology Massage Therapist?
- If Oncology Massage is not worth paying for, maybe it as an appointment that I as a client do not have to keep?
- If Oncology Massage is free now, maybe it will continue to be free so I can seek it out when I decide to do so

Suggestions

When is volunteering appropriate?

Despite some of the views expressed above, Oncology Massage Limited believes that volunteering has an important role to play in the development of the Oncology Massage modality. Volunteering may be acceptable to allow you:

- To demonstrate the value of Oncology Massage to key management decision-makers in a cancer-care organisation
 - make sure you are specific around the timeframe, the number of clients to be seen, the insurance cover, the equipment, support aids, and linen (see Att 1)
 - when the value is successfully demonstrated, you may be invited to discuss a transition from volunteer to paid service provider
- To build up your practical hours to increase your confidence, and/or comply with professional development or registration benchmarks
- To provide pro bono services to a client who may otherwise suffer unacceptably due to their personal circumstances
 - urgent need, imminent passing, lack of regular access to services
- To fulfil your philosophical or religious need to give alms to the poor
 - for example, *tithe* (Christian), *Zakat* (Islam), or *ma'aser kesafim* (Jewish).

Who pays?

If a cancer-care organisation is charging their client, you should be charging that organisation. If a cancer-care organisation is not charging the client, maybe you can ask yourself the volunteering question. The cancer-care organisation may choose to pay when they see the difference it makes.

If the cancer-care organisation cannot pay for your services, maybe the client or their family and friends could be invited to pay. Gift vouchers for a massage or a series of massages may allow your clients' family and friends to support their loved one – much better than flowers or chocolates!

If the client or their family and friends cannot pay, maybe you can ask yourself the volunteering question. The client or their family and friends may choose to pay when they experience the difference it makes. Maybe it is better to think about your services as pro bono rather than as a volunteer.

If cancer-care organisations can pay a little, maybe clients or their family and friends could be invited to make a co-payment.

So...do I volunteer or walk away?

As stated before, as Oncology Massage graduates, you are almost universally independent businesses in your own right so it is a personal business decision for each of you to make. Our only suggestion is that you make a conscious decision about if, and when, you volunteer:

- Understand your motivations – think about why you want to volunteer, what you are prepared to do, and what you are not prepared to do – think about your personal and financial circumstances – sometimes Oncology Massage may be your livelihood and other times it may be your gift
- Pick your beneficiaries – you may provide pro bono services to a particular client or organisation – financially independent clients and organisations may not be the most appropriate recipients of your benevolence
- Choose your conditions – you may volunteer your services at particular times, on particular days, or at particular events – you may provide pro bono services, provide your services at a reduced rate, or charge at the full rate
- Communicate your position – make sure everybody knows what your position is on volunteering – make it clear what your professional rates are even when you are volunteering – invoice clients at the full rate and then apply your pro bono discount
- Plan your exit strategy – you should identify and communicate an appropriate, logical and well-understood sunset clause for any volunteering engagement.

For further information, please [email us](#).

Volunteering as an Oncology Massage Therapist

The following checklist forms the basis of a discussion with an organisation for which you may be considering volunteering. The answers to those questions marked with an asterisk should be clear in your mind before you speak to the volunteer-receiving organisation:

Scope

- What am I prepared to do? *
- What am I not prepared to do? *
- What am I expected to do?
- What am I not expected to do?

Timeframe

- When will the pilot program start?
- When will the pilot program finish?
- On what days and during which times will I be volunteering on site? *
- How many clients will I be seeing each day? *
- For how long will the appointments last? *
- How much notice of early termination must be given?

People

Volunteers

- Who will be volunteering during the pilot program? *
- Do we need access cards or swipes?
- Do we need health, security or police clearances?
- Do we need particular vaccinations or immunisations?
- May we have an induction briefing on organisational policies and procedures?
- May we have access to your grief & counselling resources?

Clinical

- Who is my clinical contact for client information?
- How do I access client clinical records?

Administration

- Who will do the marketing?
- Who will do the appointment booking?
- If required, who will do the laundry?
- If required, who will do the room cleaning?
- Where will we park our cars?

Resources

- Where will the massages be provided?
- If required, who will provide the massage table?
- If required, who will provide the towels & bolsters?
- Who will pay for any consumables?
- Can we store items on site?

Governance

- Who is my first point of contact for the program?
- Who is my back-up contact for the program?
- How will my insurance and that of the client be managed?
- What program reporting is required?
- What appointment reporting is required?
- How will the success of the pilot program be measured? *
- Under what circumstances would we discuss a possible transition from volunteer to paid service provider?