



# Patient Power

## Oncology Massage: Safe and Effective Massage Therapy for Cancer Patients

**Rob MacDonald, LMT**  
Certified Massage Therapist  
UC San Diego Moores Cancer Center

*Please remember the opinions expressed on Patient Power are not necessarily the views of our sponsors, contributors, partners or Patient Power. Our discussions are not a substitute for seeking medical advice or care from your own doctor. That's how you'll get care that's most appropriate for you.*

**Andrew Schorr:**

Hello and welcome to Patient Power. I'm Andrew Schorr reporting on location from South Burlington, Vermont. And now I want you to meet our guest, that's Rob MacDonald. He is at the Moores Cancer Center near San Diego in La Jolla, California, and that's where I go for care. He's a licensed massage therapist, and he specializes in helping cancer patients. So he's an oncology massage therapist. Rob, welcome to Patient Power.

**Rob MacDonald:**

Thank you, Andrew. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm looking forward to being able to communicate with your population what oncology massage is and how it can benefit patients.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Let's talk about how we met. So I was having an infusion at the Moores Cancer Center not so long ago, and I heard an announcement that if somebody wanted a foot massage just raise your hand. And I told the nurse right away, I'm in, and then you came by, and we got to talk while you were massaging my feet. And you explained to me that there's a new program at the UCSD Moores Cancer Center that brought you in.

So, first of all, tell us about your program. How did that happen? Because it sounds so cool, and I know I enjoyed it.

**Rob MacDonald:**

So we have—we launched the massage program March 1st and were able to bring massage therapy to Moores through the generous contribution of a private donor. This was a donor that saw the benefits of massage therapy and wanted our patients at Moores Cancer Center to be able to benefit from this service. So starting March 1st, we launched the massage program. Phase one was being able to introduce free 20-minute foot massages for any patients receiving infusion treatments. We've been doing that now for close to six months.

We have expanded the program as well to be able to offer it to the breast cancer patients over at Komen Outpatient Pavilion next to us as well. So the program is expanding. Patients are loving it. We're really fortunate to be able to offer this service to our patients.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Wow. Well, patients loving it, I know I did. And what cancer patients can benefit from this? Like you mention at the breast center. I think of women with lymphedema, and I know massage can come into play there, but typically where does cancer massage fit in?

**Rob MacDonald:**

Well, a big part of what I'm doing when I'm working on patients is educating them on the benefits of oncology massage. Pretty much every patient, every cancer patient can benefit from massage regardless of where you are in your treatment, where you are in post-treatment, even counting years out. The main thing what I'm telling patients with cancer is that oncology massage is an adaptive massage that is both safe and effective while you're either in active treatment, in remission and still have some side effects from the treatment, or even years past your treatment date.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Mm-hmm. Okay. So like with lymphedema, which I think about and mentioned, is that going to help with massage, the lymph fluid?

**Rob MacDonald:**

So breast cancer patients particularly need to be more cautious with massage. It's absolutely essential that they see somebody who is trained in oncology massage. Whenever you've had lymph nodes that are either been biopsied, radiated or removed, that area, that quadrant is always at risk for lymphedema, and someone applying too vigorous pressure with massage to the arm, for example, can trigger lymphedema in that patient population. So for them, they would actually want to see someone who is well trained to provide them with that safe yet still very effective massage.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay. Now, you mentioned that people are really loving it now that you have your new program at UCSD at the Moores Cancer Center. I know for me infusion is a stressful time, and it just really helped me relax. So is that one of the benefits? Or what do you see as the benefits of massage?

**Rob MacDonald:**

Yeah, we're doing a pre- and post-massage survey with all the patients in the infusion center, and it's just a very quick, easy survey. We're looking at four parameters essentially, looking at someone's comfort level or their level of pain, their level of stress or how relaxed they are, their energy levels, and their digestive health. And by far the biggest marker that we see improvements in after a 20-minute massage is that decrease in stress and that relaxation level.

As you mentioned, being in the infusion center is somewhat stressful. People are on high alert. There are monitors that are going off. The infusion pumps are kind of beeping all the time. Patients are given a long list of things to kind of watch out for and be aware of while they are in the infusion center, so it's not most relaxing environment. And generally I find I'm massaging patients, and their loved one is sitting beside them, and they're like, what did you do to them? They're asleep, like they've never fallen asleep before in the infusion center. That's crazy.

And just the other day I was working on someone and she fell asleep within like about five minutes of massaging her, and then I saw her husband an hour-and-a-half later and he's saying she's still asleep. This is crazy. This is amazing. This is so good, so whatever you're doing, it's great to see. So by far relaxation is one of the biggest things that we're accomplishing with that 20-minute massage.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay. Now, you mentioned about people who have had surgery, or they've had lymph nodes radiation or dissection, so let's talk about the training of an oncology massage therapist. You have to be really mindful of all that. It's not just any massage therapist.

**Rob MacDonald:**

Absolutely not. So there is an organization in Orange County called Greet the Day where I received my oncology training. They have a basic introductory oncology massage course. It's a 24-hour course, and that's kind of your foundation course. We learned about all of the contraindications, all the modifications to make and ensure you're providing a very safe massage for this population, this delicate population. And then on top of that, once you've done that foundation course, there are other courses that you can take.

For example, there's one on working in an infusion center, and what that sort of environment is. And you get to go to into various infusion centers and kind of learn how they operate and what the patient needs are and how to conduct a safe massage in that environment as well. So proper training is absolutely key when you're working with massage—with cancer patients, and there are a lot of courses out there that you can take.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay. Well, for our cancer patients and family members who are watching, so what would questions be if someone could ask in their community or at their clinic to identify someone who has had that training? What should they be asking? First of all, are they all qualified?

**Rob MacDonald:**

Yeah. So the simplest thing for patients to do when they're looking for an oncology massage therapist is to access a website called Society for Oncology Massage. It's S the number 4 O-M, oncology massage .org, and in there they can just find a practitioner. They can type in their ZIP code and then find practitioners that work in the area where the patients live. That would be the simplest thing to do.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Yeah, that's great.

**Rob MacDonald:**

And then, of course, just interviewing any practitioner, making sure they have experience working on cancer patients so they have training in oncology massage. All those things are very, very important.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay.

**Rob MacDonald:**

We're also looking to expand our oncology massage services here at Moores Cancer Center as well.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Well, I'll sign up to that.

**Rob MacDonald:**

Phase one, of course, was doing the infusion center foot massages, and we're moving into that phase two now. We're hoping to be able to provide an hour-long oncology massage.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Right. And I'll tell you, folks, depending upon your wherewithal, like there was a wealthy donor, a grateful patient in San Diego who has helped start the program that Rob MacDonald is part of, wherever you are and you have the wherewithal and you believe in this or you benefited, then if it's not available at the clinic you go to or the cancer center you go to, start that discussion and see if it's possible.

So what about payment? So, Rob, is this something that usually insurance covers? Or where does massage fit it, or does it just vary by someone's policy?

**Rob MacDonald:**

So massage is a billable service. It just generally isn't billed, because it's a very complicated service to do. It is something that we're going to be looking at being able to do here at UC San Diego. We're looking at whether we can bill for the hour-long oncology massages, but currently right now it's either patient pay, or it's being funded through like generous donors like we have here.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay. Well, that's something...

**Rob MacDonald:**

...generally I find most patients—most practitioners that are working in oncology massage, their rates tend to be fairly, fairly decent, fairly inexpensive. They're attempting to take into mind that most of these patients may not be working while they're in active treatment, may have decreased funds, and usually they're trying to work with this population so they can still receive massage without it costing a lot of money to them.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Right. Well, that's a wonderful mission really of the massage community is to help people, because certainly we've got the stress. We do have the need. Now, so this fits in—would you call massage sort of a complementary approach in the treatment plan? Is that the way we should think of it?

**Rob MacDonald:**

Complementary, absolutely. So I had a patient the other day who had never received a massage before. He sat down and wanted to try it for the first time. I have just recently seen him again, and he said I'm not sure what you do to me, but I went home that night, and I had a really robust appetite. I was able to eat a really big meal after my chemotherapy, and I slept like a baby. I woke up the next day, and I had a ton of energy, and I took my dog for a walk on the beach, and I hadn't done that in months. And he attributed it all to the massage, and it would be great if that were the case, but he benefited greatly from receiving just a 20-minute foot massage. And it impacted how well he was able to tolerate his treatment, how well he was able to sleep that night, how well he was able to feed himself, so there was definitely a lot of complementary benefits to receiving this therapy.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Well, I can tell you, I felt that way, and it's great to hear that story. So for our viewers I would just say this: Massage has a place for many people going through cancer. Certainly you hear these stories, mine, folks that Rob MacDonald has been speaking about, where it's had big benefit, and now there's a push to see at some centers can it be available. And there's a group, as Rob talked about, and he gave website, and we'll make sure you see that again, so that you can see is there someone trained in oncology or cancer massage therapy who can help you. Rob MacDonald, thank you. I'm going to see you again in San Diego sometime.

**Rob MacDonald:**

Sounds good.

**Andrew Schorr:**

And I'm so delighted you have the program and that you could be with us today and for explaining the place where massage therapy has in cancer care. Thanks for being with us, Rob.

**Rob MacDonald:**

My pleasure. Thank you.

**Andrew Schorr:**

Okay. Andrew Schorr with Rob MacDonald. And please looking into massage and see if it can help you or your loved one. I'm Andrew Schorr. Remember, knowledge can be the best medicine of all.

*Please remember the opinions expressed on Patient Power are not necessarily the views of our sponsors, contributors, partners or Patient Power. Our discussions are not a substitute for seeking medical advice or care from your own doctor. That's how you'll get care that's most appropriate for you.*