

Manual Lymph Drainage: what's all the 'buzz' about?

Although Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD) is a highly specialised technique that can be used to successfully maintain lymphatic circulatory health and used to treat many injuries and pathologies, there are very few massage therapists who include it as part of their toolbox of massage techniques. Michelle Vassallo explores the reason for this.



Michelle Vassallo is the director of Rhythm Massage Development and Education

'Modern anatomists, physiologists and medical practitioners consider the lymphatic system the crux of regulating homeostasis in the human organism. Appropriate lymph dynamics are fundamental to an adequate immune system as well as facilitating cellular processes and by-product elimination. However, congestion of the lymphatic system may arise as a result of various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, which include but are not limited to restricted hemodynamics due to focal ischemia, systemic illness, tissue injuries, overexposure to adverse chemicals, food allergies and sensitivities, lack of physical movement and exercise, stress and tight fitting clothing¹.'

Having been a practitioner and teacher of MLD for the last 17 years, I can confidently say that although MLD is a highly specialised technique that can be used to successfully maintain lymphatic circulatory health and used to treat many injuries and pathologies

such as those listed above, there are very few massage therapists who include it as part of their toolbox of massage techniques.

For some time, I have pondered the 'why' of this and have come to the conclusion that many remedial massage therapists, myotherapists and other body workers simply don't understand the full picture of what MLD can achieve for both themselves and their clients. Added to this, quite often their initial training was not sufficient to give them the confidence to successfully apply the technique.

The reality is that MLD is a multi-dimensional discipline.

First of all, what does MLD do for our clients?

To list them briefly, the benefits include:

- MLD can be used as part of a post-sporting and post-injury protocol when clients are unable to receive deep tissue or other massage techniques that would otherwise be contraindicated.
- MLD can be included as a valuable 'add in' to the massage treatment plan and can be used as a prequel to many other techniques such a myofascial tension technique and deep tissue. 'With the use of MLD, we are able to gently and specifically engage the fascia and the fluid, simultaneously releasing the tissues of the lymphatic-extracellular fluid and fascial planes and in one movement negate many of the negative side effects of purely fascial work which can lead to bruising and inflammation².'
- MLD can be used in pre- and post-surgical applications as a way to prepare tissues for incision and also to promote healing and tissue health post-surgery preventing infection and other possible complications.
- MLD not only stimulates the vital functions of the skin, tissues and internal organs, it

also serves to eliminate cellular waste and stimulate the parasympathetic relaxation response inhibiting muscle tonus and pain.

- MLD can be performed as a preventative technique that bolsters our bodies' ability to rejuvenate and resist all types of stress. 'This results in the speeding up of the fluid's movement throughout the lymphatic system, filtering toxins through the major organs, enabling the increase of lymphocyte transportation and production³.'

A common list of massage room pathologies that would benefit from MLD includes:

- Fluid retention, lymphoedema, sinusitis, hay fever, pain relief and anti-inflammatory, IBS and fibromyalgia, post sporting, carpal tunnel, golfers and tennis elbow, soft tissue injury, bruising, oedema and a sluggish immune system.

Now, let us look at what MLD does for the therapist?

Most importantly, it takes a load off! When delivered in a relaxed, confident and precise manner, MLD as a modality allows the practitioner to work at a much lighter and slower pace.

The pressure used to perform MLD has been compared to the pressure used to roll an uncooked egg across a bench, slowly. In other words, it does not require much pressure at all. This in itself is a bonus to the massage therapist who can often spend a full day delivering treatments that require more pressure-intensive techniques. Evidence based research supports what we already understand, that deep tissue massage techniques can take a heavy toll by prematurely ending the careers of many massage therapists, as my research has shown.

The beauty of MLD is that it is all about moving fluid, and moving fluid requires deft touch, gentle manipulations of the surface of

the skin and super slow movements, as the reality is that the lymphatic system moves very SLOWLY! As a result, your body moves in a more relaxed and easy manner, allowing you to find rhythm in your work and softness for your wrists, hands and arms.

If you are reading this and you don't know anything about this amazing modality, get curious! Do some research and find out exactly how the lymphatic system works, and why it is such an important add-in to your massage modality list. There are so many clients who could benefit from this type of therapy and so many MTs who could benefit as well. You owe it to yourselves to find out how this works and make it happen for you and your clients.

Michelle Vassallo is the director of Rhythm Massage Development and Education. She is a fellow therapist who has passionately designed various massage workshops with a focus on making them comprehensive and relevant to

therapists. Her teaching specialities are Manual Lymphatic Drainage, Research Literacy and Self Care for Massage Therapists and Palliative Care. A dedicated educator with 17 years of experience in the field of bodywork, she provides an enjoyable and dynamic learning journey for her students.

*Her blog can be found at:
www.rhythmmessage.com.au/blog/ or
website: www.rhythmmessage.com.au*

Endnotes

1. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2755111/
2. chiklyinstitute.com/Article/lympho-fascia-release-and-viscerolymphatic-approach-fascia-bruno-chikly-md-dolmt-2016
3. www.massagetoday.com/mpacms/mt/article.php?id=14836

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