Is licensure of Art Therapy needed to protect public health and safety?

Art therapy recognizes the power of art and art-making to stimulate memories and reveal emotions. Understanding how art interacts with a client’s psychological disposition, and how to safely manage and interpret the reactions different art processes may evoke, are competencies that must be gained through substantial experiential learning that is unique to art therapy master’s degree training. The use of art as therapy thus carries risk of harm if applied beyond the competence of the practitioner.

Recent advancements in understanding the brain and its functions have increased public awareness of how the process of art-making can influence neural pathways and lead to improved physical and mental health. This has encouraged other mental health practitioners to include art materials and art therapy methods within their practice and influenced creation of growing numbers of training programs that appear to involve art therapy. The result has been to add to the public’s confusion about what are therapy involves and the level of training required for effective practice of art therapy. This presents two distinct sources of potential harm to public health and safety that can be addressed through licensure and regulation of art therapists.

Individuals using art therapy methods and art materials in their mental health practice without appropriate or adequate clinical training pose significant risk to the emotional stability of their clients. Potential risks include misinterpreting or ignoring assessments the practitioner has not been clinically trained to diagnose or treat, or eliciting adverse responses from clients that they are not properly trained to interpret or treat. The potential for harm is magnified where a client has a vulnerable psychological predisposition.

Researchers have warned mental health practitioners for several decades about potential ethical implications of using art in therapy. Writing in the Journal of Counseling & Development, Hammond and Gantt (1998) cited the likely lack of preparedness of non-art therapists for powerful reactions often evoked by art and art materials, and uncertainty about how to use artistic processes to bring such reactions under control, to stress that no mental health professional should provide therapy services beyond his or her scope of practice. The authors cautioned that “other therapists challenge ethical and legal boundaries when they attempt to make an interpretation to the client or make a generalization about the meaning of the art to others.”

Potentially more serious is the threat of public harm presented by growing numbers of university-based and online programs claiming to provide certificate training, and even master’s degrees, in fields intended to appear like art therapy. These programs typically require minimal on-site coursework, and often only online self-instruction, that do not include anything approaching the extensive coursework, clinical training, supervised practice and national credentials required of professional art therapists. Individuals with this limited training are opening clinics and advertising therapeutic services and workshops in states across the country. These programs and practitioners add to the public’s misunderstanding of art therapy and the level of specialized education and clinical training required for safe, effective, and ethical practice of art therapy. Recent examples of these programs include:

- Brandman University (part of the California based- Chapman University System) offers an Art4Healing certificate program directed to “counselors, teachers, therapists, medical professionals, artists and others interested in learning the Art4Healing method and using the exercises in their own work with children and adults suffering from abuse, illness, grief and
stress.” The certificate program requires only 45 hours of on-site workshops at the University’s Art & Creativity for Healing studio.

- The University of Florida has initiated a **Master of Arts in Arts in Medicine** program which offers a fully on-line, 35-credit master’s degree program to train artists to work in hospital settings. The University also offers a graduate certificate program in Arts in Public Health.

- Montclair State University (NJ) has initiated a **Graduate Certificate Program in Art and Health** in cooperation with Atlantic Health System in response to what it describes as increasing demand among “medical professional interested in exploring ways that the arts can be used in comprehensive health care.” Certification involves only five 3-credit graduate-level courses, in which students meet in-person only at the start and end of each course.

- The Wisdom School of Graduate Studies at Ubiquity University in Mill Valley, CA, offers an **Art and Healing Masters Program** that students can complete with seven 5-day Intensive seminars and either a practicum or thesis project. Online seminars taken on an independent study basis can also be counted “for credit toward Wisdom University academic degrees.”

- Art & Creativity for Healing, Inc. provides certification for individuals to serve as facilitators to conduct workshops in the **Art for Healing Method** that are designed “to share art as a tool for self-expression and self-exploration.” Facilitator training is provided through self-paced DVD programs in the Arts 4 Healing method that, for $1,200, “includes comprehensive training manuals and teaching methods.”

- London-based Renaissance Life Therapies offers an online course in **The Healing process of Art Therapy** that leads to a “fully accredited” art therapy diploma. The course has no age or prior training requirements and involves self-instruction through online lectures and a variety exercises and activities. The instructor is a cognitive behavioral therapist and advocate of coloring-in books for adults with no specialized training in art therapy.

- The Global Alliance for Arts & Health (GAAH) has sponsored a national **Artists in Healthcare Certification** program to attest for hospital administrators that artists who do artwork activities with patients in hospital and other healthcare have a minimal level of knowledge and competency to work in healthcare environments. Certification involves passage of a national examination, with no specific training or prior experience in healthcare required to sit for the examination.