

11-28-17 Then and Now: Massage, Body Works or Human Trafficking?

In 2003 I worked on revising the ancient and outdated massage regulation. It did not even include the word “therapy” and the practitioners were called a masseuse, if a female, or a masseur, if a male. The establishments were called parlors. All the doors to massage rooms had to have a window. They needed a window because, well, it wasn’t explained but it was implied. The implication was that officials needed the ability to make sure that no hanky-panky was going on.

Each year students of massage therapy were given the assignment to visit boards of health to get a copy of their regulation. I found it embarrassing. So, I revised them to make it clear that massage and body work were legitimate, healthy practices requiring knowledge and schooling. I took out the window requirement. I was proud of my revised regulation and the board adopted it.

Then years later, in 2012, the State formed a new board of registration of massage therapy. They would collect, each year, a hefty fee and the paperwork. Local boards of health no longer need be involved. Most towns and health agents said, “Good; one less thing for us to do.” While I understood the sentiment, as all local boards of health have too much to do, I did not agree. I told my board that we just need to know who and where, for a very small fee, for it was so very predictable that this state board was formed very quickly and would not be able to visit every single massage therapist in the whole state. They had five inspectors. For the whole state they had five inspectors. Now they have six.

Not only was the lack of inspections predictable, it opened the possibility for exactly what it was supposed to prevent; namely prostitution under the guise of a massage business by simply removing the word massage and replacing it with words such as body works.

In less than a year, the predictable became reality. In West Bridgewater a former massage therapy establishment changed the description of what it offered to “Asian body work”. “What they’re doing is skirting the laws, they changed it to Asian bodyworks which is not regulated, I guess you don’t need a license for it, so it’s not licensed or seen by the state as a massage,” Lt. Flaherty said.

Since 2013 there have been lots of raids and closures of such places and people were being charged with prostitution. Something else has happened since then. The District Attorney’s office began to question who was the victim when they realized that these providers of “body work” services were usually Asian and

very young. Many are fifteen but with makeup look like they are in their twenties. These girls arrive in this country as a result of a variety of schemes. They are offered education and job opportunities in America as they board the bus. Some are drugged and kidnapped. Once in, they can't get out. If they are deported, they face certain ostracism and shame and perhaps death.

This is not sex between consenting adults. This is human trafficking and sex trafficking. This is modern day slavery. We all must do whatever we can to prevent it and to see it for what it is. It is primarily complete human rights violations of young people. It is that first and foremost rather than a legal problem solved by arrest of the slaves or an immigration problem solved by deportation.

It is happening everywhere.

Halifax will revisit its regulations so that we do not allow this to happen. I will begin by basing it on Framingham's regulation. I thank attorney Mike Hugo for speaking to us about this at the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards' annual certificate program last Saturday.

This multibillion dollar business will certainly survive without little Halifax. But if every one of the 351 towns in Massachusetts followed the example of Framingham, it would be good to know that Massachusetts was taking a stand against slavery.

That is where we are now; taking a stand. There is more to be done but that is a start.

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