The Credentialing of Yoga Therapists

By Aggie Stewart

As a professional discipline and an emerging field within the complementary and alternative (CAM) arena of Western healthcare, yoga therapy is at a critical stage in its development. Not only is the number of yoga schools continuing to multiply, but so too is the number of schools launching yoga therapy training programs. Also on the rise is the number of individuals practicing yoga therapy as yoga therapists.

While this is happening within our field, attendance by a broad range of medical professionals and researchers at the 2014 Medical Yoga Symposium in Washington, D.C., and at IAYT’s conferences (SYTAR and SYR) attest to the growing acceptance of yoga therapy by medical professionals within Western healthcare.

This growing acceptance has the potential to benefit the public by making yoga therapy more widely available as a CAM discipline within the mainstream healthcare system and to benefit yoga therapists by increasing professional opportunities to practice and to earn a reasonable living. Conceivably, this is a win-win situation for everyone involved. Making it an actual win-win depends, in part, upon our profession’s ability to define and address in a fair, consistent, and credible way what it means to practice yoga therapy as a yoga therapist—in other words, to self-regulate.

For many years now, IAYT has been taking steps to do just this; first, by defining both yoga therapy and yoga therapist and establishing the Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists (http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iayt.org/resource/resmgr/accreditationmaterials/iayt_educational_standards_7.pdf), which IAYT’s board approved in 2012. Its next steps were to establish an accreditation program for yoga therapy training programs and an application process for accrediting such programs based on the educational standards. (See “IAYT Accreditation: Why It’s Needed, How It Was Created, and What It Means for You” in the Winter 2013 issue of YTT, pp. 20-22.) IAYT launched this program for its member schools in the summer of 2013. The first accreditation decisions are expected in late spring of 2014 and will be announced at SYTAR 2014 in June. A fundamental point to understand is that IAYT accreditation applies to programs offered by IAYT Member Schools and involves an evaluation process. It’s not enough to submit an application. The application must demonstrate that the applicant’s program meets or exceeds the educational standards.

Why is this an important point? Because it has implications both for program graduates and for those who have been practicing yoga therapy with education, training, and experience acquired prior to implementation of professional standards. These implications raise the questions of what constitutes a valid credential for individual yoga therapists and how the education, training, and experience among yoga therapists—regardless of when they began to practice—can be evaluated, understood, and communicated within the professional yoga therapy community, the healthcare provider community, and the public at large.

Western healthcare employs a process, referred to as credentialing, for vetting, or confirming, the qualifications of an individual to practice within a given field. The types of credentials typically include

- academic degrees based on the successful completion of a program of education and/or training at an accredited university, college, or post-secondary vocational school;
- licensure that is criteria-based and usually granted by the state; and
- certification that is typically awarded by a nationally recognized and often accredited agency, association, or organization.

Each of these types of credentials carries different weight and meaning.

At present, the yoga therapy profession does not have a specific, nationally recognized credentialing system for individual yoga therapists. Anyone can call herself or himself a yoga therapist and what she or he does yoga therapy. Although most yoga schools issue a diploma or certificate, this award signifies that the graduate has completed the requirements of that particular school’s program only. Currently, the certificate or diploma from a school for a yoga therapy program has no broader meaning than that. In this respect, the use of the words “certificate” and “certified” can be confusing for everyone, from members of the yoga therapy community to the healthcare-provider community to the general public. Until we have a nationally recognized credential, it is incumbent on those of us in the profession to represent our education, training, and experience accurately and with integrity.

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For an IAYT member to say that she or he is certified by IAYT is just that—a paid-for affiliation similar to any other membership someone might purchase to a professional organization, association, or club. For an IAYT member to say that she or he is certified by IAYT is a misrepresentation of her or his affiliation with IAYT and thus misleading.

As IAYT begins to accredit yoga therapist training programs, however, there will be a concomitant recognition that graduates of accredited programs will have been provided with a minimum standards-based foundation of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for the safe and effective practice of yoga therapy. For those practicing yoga therapy with education, training, and experience acquired prior to development of the accreditation process, IAYT has established a broad framework for grandparenting in or otherwise recognizing previously acquired education, training, and experience. Information on this framework and an FAQ...
about IAYT’s emerging grandparenting process can be found on the IAYT website (http://www.iayt.org/?page=IAYTAccred-Home).

Developing the framework for grandparenting in experienced yoga therapists will be part of IAYT’s next steps in the direction of developing a certification process for all yoga therapists. However, these next steps are a couple of years off, while IAYT keeps its attention focused on more fully establishing its accreditation process for yoga therapy training programs. In the meantime, for a more thorough treatment of certification, see “Certification of Practitioners” in the sidebar to this article. This is an excerpt from an excellent article written by Daniel D. Seitz, JD, EdD, on regulatory issues for emerging fields such as ours. The full article can be accessed on the IAYT website (http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iayt.org/resource/resmgr/PDFs/IJYT2010_%28Seitz-Final%29.pdf).

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No matter what shape IAYT’s certification program ultimately takes, however, it will be guided by the conventional parameters of certification programs created in Western disciplines, current research, best practices, and our own yoga tradition. The process will be voluntary. Other decisions remain to be explored and decided upon, including whether to eventually develop and administer an exam, the scope of such an exam, and whether IAYT should apply for conventional accreditation of its certification process from an organization such as the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accrediting division of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA).

For now, one of the best things we can do is educate ourselves about professional development issues, such as accreditation, credentialing, and certification. It is important for all of us in this emerging field to make sure that we fully understand what each one of these professional recognitions is and how they differ, along with the pros and cons of taking this step-up as a profession that is adjunct to Western healthcare while preserving the essential aspects of the yoga tradition. We can and should continue the conversation about how our profession is evolving and maturing. We can also increasingly educate ourselves and others in Western healthcare and the public at large about the difference between yoga and yoga therapy and what it means to have the education, training, and experience to practice as a yoga therapist. IAYT has a wealth of information on its website under the Accreditation tab on the main menu. We hope you’ll spend some time on the website and use it as a jumping off point to obtaining more information.

Important Definitions

Accreditation:
a means of ensuring quality control and promoting continuous improvement within a field of endeavor. Typically a peer review process, accreditation recognizes that someone or something has met or exceeded established standards of quality and safety for a service it offers. In the field of yoga therapy, the service is a yoga therapy training program. As a standards-based process, accreditation provides a consistent benchmark against which yoga therapy training programs can be evaluated.

Credential:
a document or other form of recognition proving a person’s qualifications that is usually the result of an evaluation process.

Credentialing:
a process of vetting, or confirming, the qualifications of an individual to practice within a given field.

Academic Degree:
recognition by an accredited university, college, or post-secondary vocational school of an individual’s successful completion of a course or program of study. Other education-related types of credentials include an associate degree, certificate, or diploma.

Licensure:
a regulatory requirement, defined and administered by a government, giving legal authorization to an individual to practice a particular skill or profession.

Certification:
a process, often voluntary, by which individuals who have demonstrated the level of knowledge and skill required in a given profession, occupation, role, or skill are identified to the public and other stakeholders by the certification body.
Certification of Practitioners

By Daniel D. Seitz, JD, EdD

Note: This is excerpted from “An Overview of Regulatory Issues for Yoga, Yoga Therapy, and Ayurveda” by Daniel D. Seitz, originally published in the 2010 issue of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy. The full article may be accessed online: http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iayt.org/resource/resmgr/PDFs/IJYT-2010_%28Seitz-Final%29.pdf. This excerpt is reprinted here with permission.

Certification is a process, often voluntary, by which individuals who have demonstrated the level of knowledge and skill required in a given profession, occupation, role, or skill are identified to the public and other stakeholders. Typically, a single private entity grants recognition—a certificate—to an individual who has met a set of qualifications established by that agency. These qualifications often consist of meeting certain educational standards and passing an examination. The examination may be entirely written or may have both written and practical components.

It should be noted that the word “certification,” as it relates to professional education and practice, causes confusion. In an emerging profession, before schools gain authorization to grant degrees, they generally issue a certificate or diploma signifying completion of the training. This may lead schools to state that they are certifying practitioners. However, certification within a profession is meant to be a uniform, objective credential, not one that varies from training program to training program. In fact, until an agreed-upon certification process is established, the “certification” of practitioners by individual schools and other organizations can, paradoxically, create a “race to the bottom,” as it is likely that some schools will issue a certificate for completion of relatively cursory training programs.

The very creation of a certification examination has a de facto defining and constraining effect on the educational programs in the field and on the profession’s scope of practice. This is because the certification agency must articulate with reasonable specificity the subject matter that the exam will cover. While individual programs may continue to teach a wide variety of approaches and philosophies, their need to equip students with the knowledge and skills to pass the exam will naturally lead to a greater conformity among programs over time. Moreover, the outliers—those programs whose philosophies and practices are furthest from the mainstream—will face the challenge of ensuring that students gain sufficient knowledge of the material that will be tested in the exam, while staying true to their vision. Any emerging profession developing a certification exam will have to work pains-takingly and inclusively to ensure buy-in among a critical mass of stakeholders. The process will benefit from seeking an acceptable balance between being prescriptive in terms of subject matter and providing latitude for some non-mainstream approaches in the field.

Creating a reliable certification exam is no small task, and the legitimacy of any certification process—especially at the outset—can be contested, both as to the level or type of education that qualifies someone for certification and the soundness of the exam itself. The challenges of creating a satisfactory certification process include defining the content of the exam, developing a pool of carefully formulated questions, establishing exam policies and secure testing sites and procedures, developing statistically reliable and defensible means to set passing scores, and ensuring sufficient funding to cover start-up expenses and ongoing operations. For a profession that wishes to establish a certification agency and exam, there is a substantial body of technical knowledge available as well as experts in the area of professional testing who can provide advice. However, accessing such resources can be expensive.

Given the complexity of developing a reliable certification process, the credibility of the process can always be questioned. One way that an agency may seek to gain greater credibility is through external “accreditation” of the certification process. Such an accreditation service is offered by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accrediting division of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA). This agency sets quality standards and accredits certification programs covering hundreds of professions and occupations. In seeking external recognition such as NCCA accreditation, there is a natural trade-off for an agency. The costs and time involved—which are not insubstantial—must be weighed against the perceived need to demonstrate the credibility of the certification process to important stakeholders. There is also an international standard, ISO/IEC 17024 (ISO is the International Organization for Standardization), that sets forth criteria for certification agencies that offer “certification of persons.” The purpose of such a standard is to foster worldwide consistency in how certification agencies conduct their work. Such a standard may pave the way for recognition of professional training across national boundaries—a goal that some governmental entities and other organizations are actively promoting.

Within a medical- or healthcare-related field, there is sometimes pressure to develop a practical exam component in addition to the written component. This is especially true if minimally trained individuals—or individuals whose training is not easily verified—may be allowed to take the exam. Since a written exam only tests theoretical knowledge at one point in time, there is always a concern that a person could pass the exam regardless of his or her practical skills and abilities; such skills and abilities are, of course, at the heart of being a competent practitioner in any healthcare-related field. Developing a reliable practical exam is, however, even more challenging than developing a reliable written exam, and administering such an exam is costly for applicants. Such exams are also more likely to be challenged by examinees on the basis of inconsistency or bias. For these reasons, some certification agencies choose to use a written format exclusively.

Regardless of whether an agency uses a written exam format or a combination of written and practical components, the agency must address the issue of what educational credentials will qualify someone to sit for the exam. In more well-established fields in the U.S., such as naturopathic medicine and acupuncture, graduation from—or current attendance in—an accredited U.S. program is the primary qualification. The stronger the educational requirements for taking a certification exam, the less pressure there is to

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ensure that a certification test covers the full range of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, since there is an assumption that the examinees’ formal education ensures basic competence in a wide range of areas. In an emerging field, educational requirements for taking a certification exam tend to be looser—especially if accreditation or some other more rigorous school approval process does not yet exist.

As with a registration process, there is typically some sort of “grandfathering” (also referred to as “grandparenting”) provision at the time when a certification process is implemented that applies to more senior practitioners trained at an earlier time when educational levels and programs were different. The grandfathering process can be applied in two ways: (1) a person who is grandfathered is deemed qualified to take the exam based on educational requirements and/or professional experience that is appropriate to the era in which he or she was trained, or (2) a person who is grandfathered is not required to take the exam at all based on satisfying era-appropriate educational requirements and/or professional experience. Generally speaking, designing a grandfathering process to be reasonably inclusive will help promote buy-in by a larger proportion of the profession. However, there is almost inevitably a trade-off, since some grandfathered practitioners may be deficient in the knowledge and skills considered necessary for safe and effective practice. YTT

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