

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL HEALTH CARE AND SPA THERAPIST TRAINING IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

**Sarah Kajonborrirak
Founder
School of Aerobic Dance and Spa
Bangkok Thailand**

ABSTRACT

The spa industry is experiencing very fast growth and this is having an effect on human resource management in the spa industry. With strong growth in the industry and the number of new spas doubling every year, this young industry is pushing itself in many directions to accommodate industry demand.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last 10 years, the spa industry has faced difficulties in meeting the market demand for experts, academic instructors, and training schools that have the high academic standards required. Currently, 90% of spa education and training being provided in Asia comes from training centers or in-house training department. 90% of spa therapists in the market gain knowledge from their colleagues and have develop their expertise from work experience or from on-the-job training. The lack of agreed and accepted standards of education and training, as well as on-the-job learning poses a risk to spa customers who are unaware of the situation in the spa industry. The increasing growth in the spa industry and the way the industry conducts itself is unhealthy and could cause serious problems for the industry in the very near future.

With government support and good marketing, Asian spas have become increasingly popular in recent years. The popularity of Asian spas in the international market is causing greater demand for trained Asian spa personnel in the international market. Asian spas have proven to be a good source of income and a way of increasing GDP throughout Asia due to their unique characteristics in the global industry.

However, there are numbers of problems for Asian spa industry personnel seeking work overseas whether in other Asian countries or in the West. These problems are mainly caused by the lack of an official Asian spa industry organization which is able to set industry standards and to certify spa therapists meet the global standard.

INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

Before discussing industry standards, it is important to understand how the massage and spa business came to be an industry. The discussion will be limited to Asian spas.

Asia has a rich cultural history. The culture and local wisdom in Asia varies greatly from country to country. Spa culture also varies by its origin. For example, Shiatsu and Onzen spa culture

from Japan; Chinese acupuncture, Reflexology, Tui-Na and Tai Chi from China, Ayurveda from India, and Traditional Thai Massage from Thailand. It is a basic need for indigenous people in each country to use their ancient practices and experience in herbal remedies or therapeutic treatment in healing themselves. For thousands of years, people have practiced this inherited knowledge that has been passed along from generation to generation.

Asian spas offer a variety of treatments, from martial arts to Thai boxing, and from Ayurvedic to Thai massage. In Thailand alone, there are more than 3 original Thai massage training centers who have made a name for themselves. Similarly, in India, there are a number of well-known Ayurveda centers. There is no right or wrong training method as each center has its own effective method of training people to heal and treat others.

The majority of spa therapists in Asia are masseuses, beauty salon personnel, physiotherapists, nurse aides and persons with a fitness instructors' background. Although, some spa associations such as the Thai Spa Association have collaborated with the Ministry of Public Health to setup a national accredited standard for spa facility and its operators. Spa therapists face problems when seeking work overseas because there is no internationally recognized standard which is accepted by the international market.

INDUSTRY STANDARD

Apart from Thailand where the spa industry is already highly developed, there are a number of other countries in Asia whose spa industry is still developing and this includes China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea and Myanmar. However, spa education and training provided in these countries is limited and there is no industry body nor accredited standard available from any official organization that has been adopted. Meanwhile, demand in the spa industry is continuing to grow, but the lack of an accepted standard puts the industry at risk.

Spa treatment services involve interacting and providing personal care to spa customers. This means there is a serious risk to the customer's health and wellbeing if the services are performed by an under-skilled therapist.

Therefore, to have a recognized and unbiased organization to manage an internationally recognized standard for the spa industry in Asia is very important. There are three main areas of the spa industry where standards need to be adopted:

- 1) School Accreditation
- 2) Therapist Skills
- 3) Spa Facility

School Accreditation

There are significant overlaps between the spa, tourism and hotel industries. For a long time, the hotel and tourism industries have had their own educational institutes to train industry personnel.

For example, PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) is a standard association for diving. Golf and tennis training schools also have international recognized standard.

There are already a number of hotel and tourism schools with recognized teaching standards, and spa education and training courses could also be provided for under this education framework. Being able to take spa education and training courses will also offer increased and diverse career opportunities for students at hotel and tourism schools besides the standard classes currently offered at hotel and tourism schools which include culinary, gastronomy, housekeeping or front office.

The spa industry response to increased demand has been to develop its human resources to encourage a number of massage and spa training centers, salon training schools and freelance trainers offering spa training and recruitment services, but there are unable to provide formal

accreditation or an accepted academic standard. Education and training provided by these various schools varies greatly. The lack of accreditation and standards will create problems for the industry and could result in serious repercussions for the industry as a whole.

Therapist Skills (Accreditation)

Who need to be accredited?

1. Spa operators and management who will be employed in the spa industry. Employers always wants to employ personnel who have graduated from certified educational institutes.
2. Spa therapists require documentation certifying their skills. Such documentation is useful for therapists seeking work domestically and internationally. Documentation is also useful as it is generally required in the visa application process to work in an overseas country.

Currently, each country is trying to create their own industry body to make policy and regulations. Such bodies would then not collaborate with other countries in the region and there will still be no internationally recognized Asian standard which is accepted worldwide.

Some countries have laws and regulations to protect domestic spa therapists or masseuses from foreign workers. For example, in South Korea, a masseuse is a traditional occupation for the blind only. In Japan, it is very difficult for a foreign therapist to obtain a Japanese work visa. While in USA, Italy, Germany, and Netherlands, the respective governments of each country still have an attitude or idea that spa therapists are related to the sex industry which complicates the visa application process.

These barriers for obtaining a work visa are proving to be a lost opportunity for the industry. The industry needs a large, respected, neutral and regional level organization to be able to negotiate at the government level to solve these problems. Local spa associations do not have the necessary clout or the international recognition to be able to do this.

Where an employer wants to hire a spa therapist from Asia and the spa therapists are willing to work and despite the therapists having certified or accredited skills from relevant organizations, there are still problems with visa

applications for these spa therapists. Spa therapists are losing out of employment opportunities. For example, a spa therapist with three years working experience in Thailand will receive a salary of around 400 to 600 US dollars a month, but the same person would get about 800 to 1,200 US dollars a month if they were working overseas.

Nowadays, international accreditation in the spa industry relies on inspection and evaluation from UK and Swiss organizations or associations in the beauty business. Relying on European organizations for providing accreditation to Asian-based therapist skills is not real and true accreditation because the Asian spa practice has passed down through the generations and developed in Asia so the organization would need Asian spa experts from every Asian spa culture. Therefore, there are problems when creating and examining the standards and accrediting a spa therapist who possesses knowledge of Asian spas.

Any organization and association accrediting Asian spas should include persons who have real and actual knowledge of Asian spas so that they can give a proper assessment and accreditation of a spa therapist's skills.

Presently, the International Spa Association, whose head office is in the US, is now trying to take the position as a leader to organize spa conventions in Asian countries and to create regulations and examinations for accredited spa therapists. However, the majority of member in the Asian spa community are not applying for accreditation through the International Spa Association.

Spa schools, hotel corporate spas, spa franchises and management companies are still moving ahead to train their own therapists with their own teaching standards and to send their therapists to work overseas. The Asian spa community is in need of an Asian Accreditation Center where every party is playing a part. Otherwise, in the not to distant future, there are likely to be complaints from employers in the West that the therapists that are being sent to work have a varying standards of skill and this will create a bad image for the Asian spa industry as a whole.

Spa Facility

At the moment there are a number of awards given by groups, organizations, associations and publishing houses in the spa industry to spa facilities. Each body has their own awards and the criterion varies greatly. However, the average tourist does not know the difference between the different awards and cannot use it as a reference. If you are a tourist traveling to Asia, you would likely have trust in PATA, as a large internationally recognized organization involved in the tourism industry, to be able to make decisions in regards to awards for the spa industry. Presently, there is no travel associations involved in the spa industry. This is despite the fact that more than 50% of the spa destinations are located in hotels or resorts.

SUMMARY

With the continuing growth and demand of spas within the hospitality industry, it is necessary that the hospitality or tourism industries become involved in the spa industry. This involvement should start from the basic fundamentals such as opening a spa school within the tourism field at a respectable tourism university. This will be an academic blueprint for other spa schools in the region.

Having a respectable tourism organization to accredit outstanding spas and their operators is vital to maintain standard and protect this growing sector of hospitality industry which is providing publicity, reputation and revenue for the region.

REFERENCES

Olimpo, F.E. (2003). Health Care Bargain for the World. Siamese Magazine, pp. 22-28. Thailand. Feature Data (Thailand) Co., Ltd.

Walden-Schertz, Jeremy (2003). The Spa Industry, Thailand Opportunities Magazine, pp. 28-32. Thailand. Asia Communications Group Co., Ltd.

Sapcharoen, Phennapa Dr., (2004). Thai Massage for Overseas Market . Herbs for Health, pp. 85-86. Thailand. Utilized Co., Ltd.

Johanson, Jeremy (2005). Spa Asia Wellness summit 2005. Spa Asia Magazine, pp.50-56. Singapore. Wellness Media Pte. Ltd.

ISPA Education & Resources, Retrieved March 10, 2006, from www.experienceispa.com

BABTAC, Retrieved March 10, 2006, from www.babtac.com

CIBTAC, Retrieved March 10, 2006, from www.cibtac.com