

CHRONICLE BUSINESS FOCUS

# Stressing the big message

Therapists will always say a massage is good for you, but how do you verify the claims? **Alan Bunce** spoke to one agency which is determined to demonstrate the point.

**M**ASSAGE has long been said to reduce stress, but now one Reading-based firm is out to offer definitive proof that it does.

The Therapy Agency, a nationwide network of vetted and trusted therapists, has pulled together a series of research to back its claim that massage is good for you. It has just published On-site Massage: The Financial Benefits and later this month goes on to do research of its own.

On top of that Jason Parlour, who founded the Earley-based agency, has teamed up with a cognitive testing company to carry out brain tests on people before and after a massage to try to show measurable improvements.

Trials start this month and, as they progress, the agency will look to involve local firms. Mr Parlour needs no convincing himself about the benefits of on-site massage. His aim is to spread massage and other therapies further than just traditional spas and the health clubs.

He wants more firms interested in on-site, workplace treatments.

He said: "People recognise massage is something that feels nice but we want to re-educate. It does feel good but it is very beneficial to people and not a lot of them actually appreciate that."

"Stress is very very invasive. It affects the body in lots of different ways. If someone is stressed their stomach and digestion gets worse, their brain function decreases and they can be more aggressive."

His publication reports that in 1997 Reebok International tested the effectiveness of on-site massage. Out of 118 employees:

- 66% reported staying at work for the massage, when they would otherwise have gone home sick;
  - 83% reported a reduced medical intervention for a previous health issue;
  - 92% reported an increased alertness, motivation and productivity;
  - 98% reported reduced work-related stress.
- In one study in Florida, 26 people were asked to have a 15-minute chair massage twice a week for five weeks, while a group of 24 were asked to simply relax in the

massage chair.

Before, during and after the electrical activity in their brains was checked on an electroencephalogram (EEG) machine. They also had to undertake some maths and were tested for depression and anxiety.

The massage group showed greater brain activity, increased speed in the maths test and lower anxiety. Depression scores were the same for both groups, but job stress scores were lower for the massage group.

At chicken-processing plants run by Wampler Foods in Virginia, a programme of massage, exercise and ergonomics was used between 1990 and 1998 and saw a 75% drop in repetitive strain injury.

Aggression was put to the test in one study in Sweden where bus drivers were given relaxation techniques.

Fuel consumption went down 25% and accidents went down 80%.

A massage therapy programme implemented by pharmaceutical firm, Baxter Corp was credited with a 25% drop in work-related injuries over four years and compensation claims dropped by \$200,000.

Mr Parlour said: "You find that a lot of people with employers who have massage therapists feel much more committed to staying there."

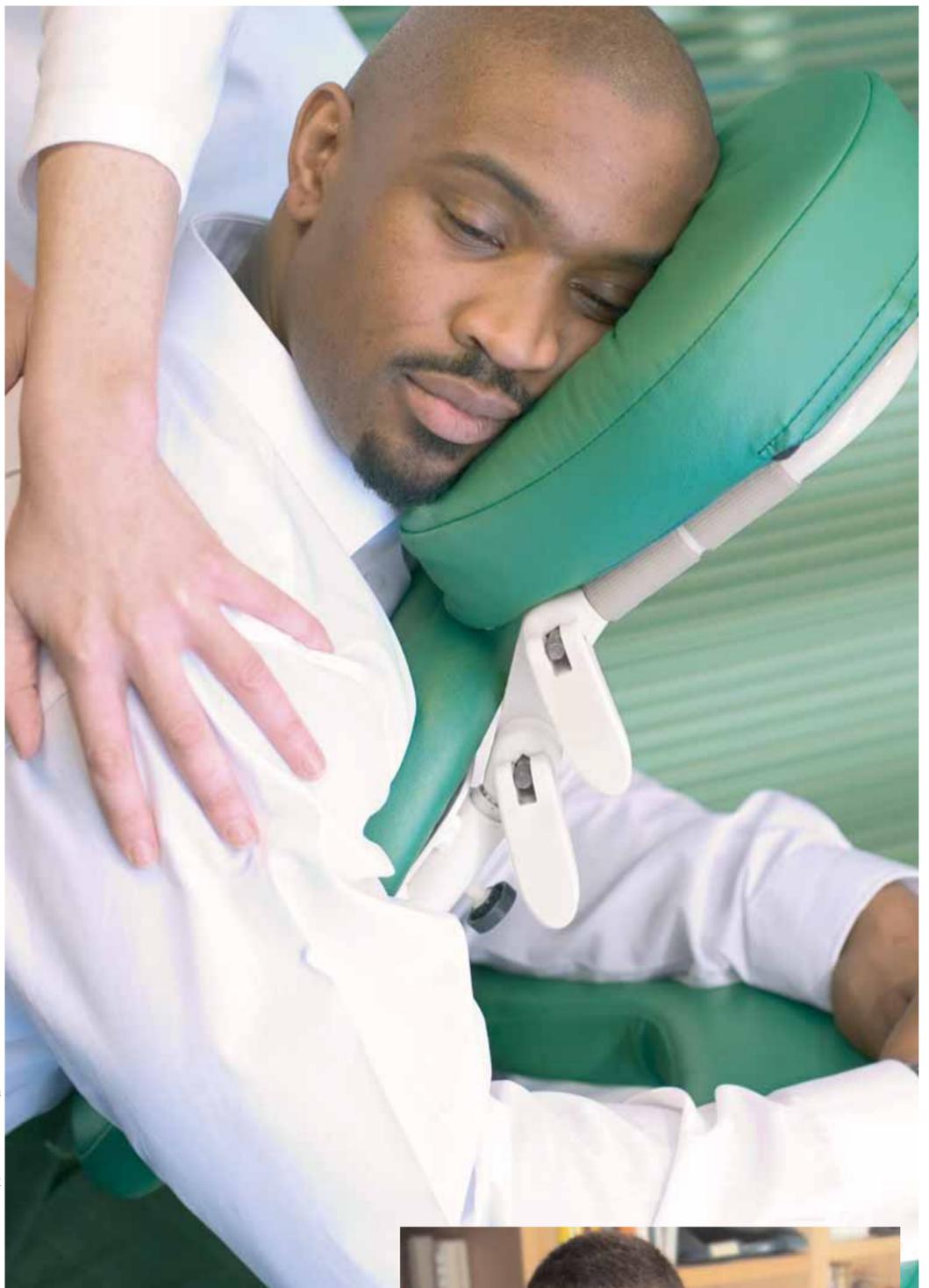
"We have actually had people who have gone to jobs who have been paid less just because there is a massage therapist there."

He added: "Stress is fine short term, but sustained stress causes long term damage."

Mr Parlour, now with around 85 therapists in his nationwide agency, acts partly as regulator. He beefed up the requirements last year and thinned down the number of members which had been as high as 200. Therapists must undergo an interview, show qualifications, certificates and references, and client feedback is researched. Many are rejected and any client not happy with therapist services can get free treatment from another agency therapist.

Mr Parlour said: "Our feedback showed that 100% of our clients gave an overall rating of each therapist as either 'good' or 'excellent'."

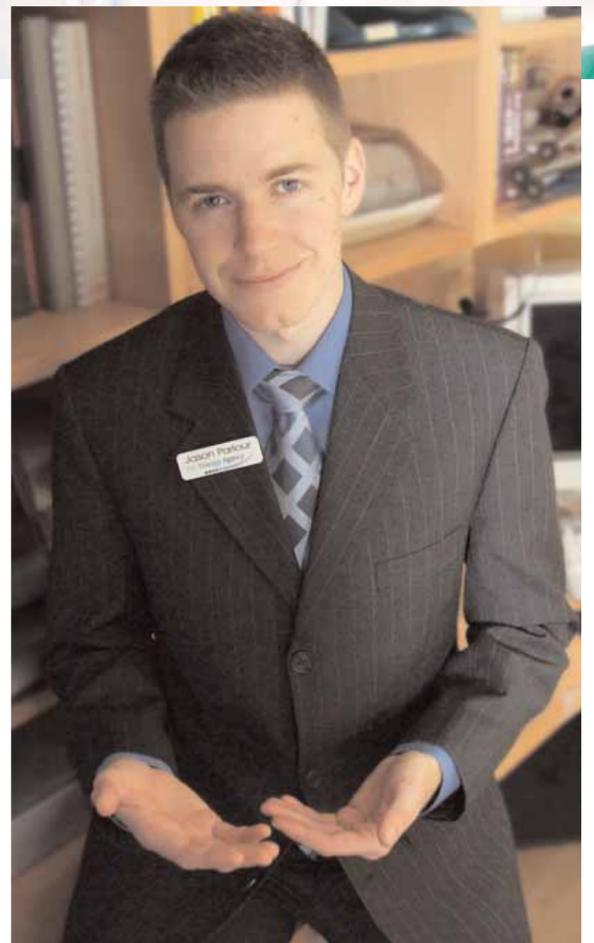
● Link [www.therapy-agency.co.uk](http://www.therapy-agency.co.uk)



Relaxing: The massage chair treatment does have benefits.



Getting the works: Massage not only feels nice, it has long-term benefits for under-pressure workers.



Visionary: Jason Parlour is spreading the word that massage does reduce workplace stress.