

Shiatsu in Austria. The Beginnings, the Present and the European Dimension (Eduard Tripp, Chris McAlister)

The beginnings of Shiatsu in Austria date back to the late 1970s. At that time, training courses were less extensive and less structured compared with current standards. Professionalism in today's sense did not emerge until the foundation of the Austrian Shiatsu Association (ÖDS) in the autumn of 1993. Seven training providers came together to create binding structures within this joint foundation. Eduard Tripp, co-author of this text, was one of them.

The basis at that time was two and a half years of training and at least 300 training hours. Because of the different styles, the curriculum was designed with an eye to commonalities as well as the preservation of individual differences. At the time, all the providers were more or less influenced by Masunaga, but still there was a wide range of content eg. from strongly TCM-influenced to almost TCM-free. This principle also became the defining characteristic for the curriculum designed by the European Shiatsu Federation (ESF), which was co-founded by the Austrian Shiatsu association in 1994. The ÖDS is still a member to this day.

Shiatsu in Austria was initially practiced in a kind of "grey zone" but around the turn of the millennium it became established as an autonomous profession within the massage trade. Since 2003, Shiatsu practitioners have therefore been able to practice Shiatsu commercially as an independent form of massage. Austria thus became the first country in Europe in which Shiatsu was not only tolerated but also an independent, legally defined and protected profession.

The ESF played a significant, albeit indirect, role in this development. Thanks to the ESF, Shiatsu was regulated on a pan-European basis and Shiatsu was included in the list of recommended CAM therapies in the Lannoye-Report – a direct result of ESF lobbying. This in turn significantly strengthened the position of the Austrian association in its negotiations.

Funnily enough, it seemed more realistic then than it does today that Shiatsu would find its way directly into the health sector of the European Union. The reason for this optimism was that the EU's understanding of health was seen to be comparatively modern and not stuck in the conventional understanding of doctors as the sole specialists in matters of health and disease. In some areas, EU health policies have indeed been revolutionary, and with campaigns such as "Health in all Policies" they have had an impact on health thinking in the member states. This has also raised hopes here in Austria that CAM methods would enter into and develop more fully within the official health care system.

However, these hopes have not yet been fulfilled in the current health system in Austria. On the

contrary, things generally seem to have become more restrictive, especially with the call for "evidence-based medicine". This trend was demonstrated very clearly by the last draft of the law on physicians, which in autumn 2018 sought to establish doctors as exclusive users and arbitrators of CAM in Austria.

Due to these social developments in Austria and other European countries, as well as in the European Union itself, the ESF is now pursuing a new path. The shift in its strategy has led away from direct recognition within the health sector and towards the fundamental right to work for Shiatsu and other CAM practitioners.

According to the founding charters of the EU, the right to exercise one's trade across the entire geographic area of the European Community is recorded as a sacrosanct principle. The fact is however, that these fundamental principles have never been enacted into specific laws, at least as regards the practice of CAM. This means that, while in principle Shiatsu practitioners should be able to move to any country within the EU and freely practice their profession, this is simply not the case. The main reason for this is the persistence of restrictions on different types of health practices in the EU, which in most countries amounts to a monopoly of the "classical" medical professions - where there is no freedom for complementary methods.

Shiatsu is recognized as a profession in a few European countries (Austria, as mentioned above, Switzerland and to some extent in France). However, this recognition has different bases. While Shiatsu in Switzerland is officially anchored in the health sector as a complementary therapeutic method, the situation in Austria is legally speaking that Shiatsu only serves to maintain health and well-being. The treatment of sick people to regain their health is not permitted by law. In France it is even more delicately phrased.

This means that sick people in almost all of Europe do not have free access to Shiatsu treatments and cannot benefit from our support due to the medical monopoly on the one hand, and on the other, because of the costs they have to pay out of their own pockets. Moreover, information about our treatments and their potential benefits is barely accessible to EU citizens.

In this situation, as mentioned above, the ESF has formulated its current strategy by which it calls on the ministry of trade in the first hand (and others) to enact provisions for the recognition of a specific right to work for CAM practitioners across the EU and to make our services freely available to the citizens of the EU.

Returning to the situation in Austria, while Shiatsu was still quite unknown at the turn of the millennium, the establishment of Shiatsu as an independent profession triggered a substantial hype and training centres experienced a distinct boom. Courses were often booked out for months in advance and the training to become a Shiatsu practitioner became so well known in certain circles that even cabaret artists used the topic in their acts.

During the peak period, there were up to 18 schools in Austria, 10 of them in Vienna alone. This represents a very high density, considering that Austria has less than 9 million inhabitants and Vienna

nearly 2 million.

The hype and the large number of training courses on offer ultimately had two distinct effects. On the one hand, the number of "full-time Shiatsu practitioners", able to live exclusively from their work with Shiatsu, increased and population groups were reached who had hitherto never been in contact with Shiatsu. On the other hand, the demand for the many training providers gradually decreased, as other methods that promised a shorter training period for professional practice entered the market, such as Nuad, the traditional Thai massage. As a result, some schools had to close their doors and today there are only 14 schools, including only four of the original founding institutions.

Even though Shiatsu has become established, the professional self-image and security of the profession are still issues that cause Austrian Shiatsu practitioners and their association some concern. So long as Shiatsu is not established throughout Europe, the domestic professional position remains fragile.

The fact that Shiatsu practitioners care about their legal and professional position is demonstrated by the steadily increasing number of ÖDS members, which recently crossed the 1000 mark. Since the departure of the UKSS, Austria is now the Shiatsu organisation with the largest number of members in the ESF.

This is important because the number of members in each national Shiatsu organisation is critical for the level of resources available to the ESF. Put simply, the more members, the more resources are available to successfully implement the chosen strategy, which involves contacting EU officials, MEPs, other CAM organisations, key people in NGOs and attendance at meetings both in Brussels and elsewhere.

There are, of course, two other major areas of ESF activity – education and research. Both require time and energy, but the topic of research is the one that most urgently raises the question of funding for the purposes of realizing substantial research projects in Europe. At the moment, no other topic gets Shiatsu practitioners as excited as research, especially in view of the increasing demand for evidence based data in the political arena.

Legally and professionally, Shiatsu in Austria is currently assigned to commercial massage, a status that some practitioners dislike, because they do not see themselves as masseurs. What is more, this commercial status creates its own grey zone. Strictly speaking it would imply that only healthy people could formally receive Shiatsu, whereas in practice many people come for Shiatsu precisely because of their health complaints.

Austrian Shiatsu practitioners and the ÖDS are thus forced to maintain a balancing act and argue that people are supported in their recovery, but that illnesses are not treated (this is reserved for medical personnel within the health system). This requires cooperation with open-minded doctors, encouraging them to see Shiatsu treatments as a complement and support rather than as competition. At the same time, this situation also poses a challenge to the training centres who have to prepare their students for the scope and limits dictated by these specific circumstances.

With all of this in mind, in June this year, the ÖDS is organising its annual ÖDS-Tage, ÖDS Days. Within this event, one of the highlights will be the formal implementation of a research study by Achim Schrievers, which is scheduled to take place in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. This is part two of a study monitoring the effects of Shiatsu in Mindfulness practice. As part of the event, a special workshop will be held for practitioners who wish to participate in the study.

Parallel with this a host of international and Austrian teachers will present short seminars on a range of topics over three days. These will be available to all ÖDS members for a nominal fee. There will also be an international round table discussion featuring Shiatsu practitioners with a special interest in research. Conducted in English, it will be available to all Shiatsu practitioners in Europe via direct transmission on www.okitalk.com (internet radio). A Youtube clip will appear after the event, for which the ESF has provided funding.

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