



# Breaking the taboo

Sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour from clients is a very real issue in spas. **Kathryn Conway** explores how we should be protecting our teams

**W**hen sexual misconduct in the spa industry has made headlines, it has often been therapists' abuse of clients in the spotlight. The renewed claims made last year of sexual assault at Massage Envy franchises in the US serve as a reminder of the shocking abuse of trust that can occur behind closed doors. However, what seems to be far less widely reported is the vulnerability of spa employees themselves.

This is particularly troublesome given the research undertaken by Tara Hanrahan, group director of spa operations at Spa Cenvaree, the spa brand of Centara Hotels & Resorts, ahead of the 2018 World Spa & Wellness Asia Convention. As chair of a discussion on the topic, Hanrahan conducted an anonymous survey of therapists and found that 74% of the 180 respondents had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their career.

There is a widely held perception that this type of behaviour is more common in Asia, something that Georgia Sutherland, founder and director of Glo Day Spa & Salon, which runs four sites in Bali, finds frustrating. "Many brothels or places that offer these extra services call themselves spas, creating a misconception among guests about which spas offer what," she says.

Sutherland notes that spa operators in Asia are doing much to improve regulation of the industry there; however, we need to acknowledge that sexual harassment in spas can occur anywhere in the world. And with movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up forcing every industry to scrutinise its attitudes towards sexual misconduct in the workplace, we sought the opinions of spa directors and industry experts to find out what can be done by spas to address the issue in their own businesses.



## 1 Define what constitutes inappropriate behaviour

Having a clear picture of what is classed as inappropriate behaviour will help therapists call it out should it occur. Hanrahan defines sexual harassment as, “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal and physical inappropriate behaviour that in any way makes a person feel unsafe.”

In the spa industry, she notes that physical inappropriate behaviour includes, but is not limited to, guests exposing themselves; guests touching the therapist inappropriately; guests touching themselves inappropriately; and guests refusing to wear the provided underwear. Verbal inappropriate behaviour, meanwhile, can be defined as a request for “extra services”, or derogatory or sexist comments.

However, as Jeremy McCarthy, group director of spa at Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, highlights, interpreting inappropriate behaviour can be difficult. “I hear a lot of spa managers say that they train their staff to immediately leave the room and report to a manager as soon as the guest does something inappropriate, but often the behaviour may be more subtle and difficult to interpret. Therapists have to learn how to handle different degrees of guest behaviour – how to interpret subtle nuances and send a guest clear signals for what the expectations are during a treatment.”

## 2 Make sure staff are clear on what to do

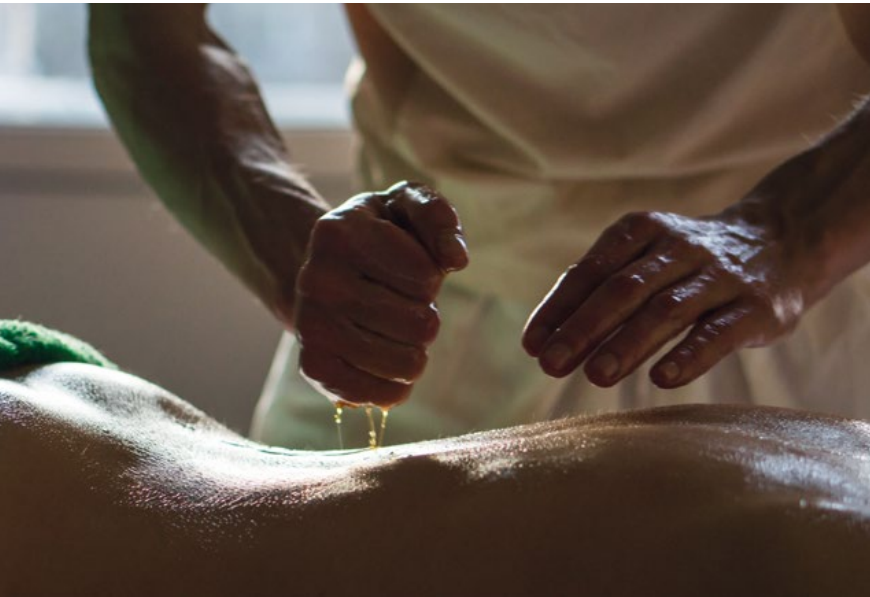
Todd Hewitt, assistant vice president of spa at Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, agrees, and explains that he has a “three strikes and



you’re out” rule. “A therapist should never automatically assume that suspected behaviour is inappropriate, unless blatant,” he says. “If it is blatant, then the treatment is to be ended immediately and the guest told that their behaviour is not tolerated and that the manager will be waiting outside the treatment room to speak to them.”

If a therapist suspects inappropriate behavior, Hewitt advises them to “change what you’re doing to try and see if the behaviour continues. For example, for a guest whose hands seem to be wandering around the massage table towards the therapist, change the location of the massage to the feet or lower legs. Don’t encourage conversation with the guest by discussing anything to do with sex, religion or politics,” explains Hewitt.

He adds, “If this first step does not succeed and the suspected behaviour continues to a second incident, politely direct them to change their behaviour and say that you will be unable to continue on with the treatment (strike two). The treatment >



does not begin again until the guest acknowledges the therapist.”

Hewitt concludes: “If the behaviour continues (strike three), stop performing the service – hands should be removed from the guest – and inform them that you are unable to finish the treatment and you will be waiting outside the room with the manager.”

However, Charlie Thompson, managing director of UK-based spa membership group The Massage Company, takes a more direct approach: “My advice to all therapists is that there is no margin for discussion – it is black and white, not grey. You should have the right to exit the room from any treatment, at any time.”

### 3 Draw up a standard operating policy on sexual harassment

“At The Massage Company (TMC) we have a very simple rule that is 100% non-flexible: the power of touch only goes one way,” Thompson says. “Any customer who even implies the opposite is banned, and their customer record updated. This is part of our TMC Safety Policy, and our staff have witnessed us implement this.”

While it makes sense for every spa to draw up its own policy on sexual harassment, Hanrahan believes a collective zero-tolerance approach is also required. “This includes implementing an industry-wide policy that is black and white in its dealing with sexual harassment,” she says. To this end, Hanrahan has created a standard

operating policy that she is keen to encourage all spa operators to adopt and communicate to clients prior to treatment. “An effective, unobtrusive way to do this is to have a short paragraph on the guest consultation form,” she explains.

### 4 Train all staff to deal with inappropriate behaviour

Training spa managers and directors to deal effectively with incidents of sexual misconduct, whether this be from a guest or staff member, is vital, but so too is empowering therapists to handle sexual harassment should it arise. “You do not want a therapist to have to make a decision about how to handle a situation when they are under the stress of the moment,” says McCarthy. “They should be thoroughly trained so they know exactly what to do.”

Our experts agree that there are number of effective methods that can be used:

#### • Role play

“Use role play exercises to help therapists practise their conversations and actions,” says Nongluck Wonglor, assistant spa manager at Chiva-Som International Health Resort. “During the sessions, they will learn how to drape towels tightly and use working positions that lower the risk of impolite behaviour from guests,” she adds.

“Focus on the wording to be used to clients,” advises Hanrahan. “Have team members practise saying the words out loud so they feel comfortable with them. This is particularly important if your team members are from cultures where speaking out is uncommon.”

### • Case studies

“Trainers should give example case studies and discuss how to deal with a variety of scenarios so therapists are able to evaluate the level and seriousness of the situation, and take action accordingly,” says Wonglor.

### • Ongoing training

“Every professional that joins our company goes through 150 hours of training in our different protocols, rituals, and our conduct and behaviour policy,” says Gustavo Albanesi, founder of the Buddha Spa in Sao Paulo, Brazil. “Every six months, we do additional technical training for all our therapists, with a personal evaluation.”

One of the key messages is to ensure that when therapists do experience inappropriate behaviour, they feel supported by management. “It’s really important that you push home that this is an open topic, not a closed one,” advises Linda Overman, spa director at JW Marriott Resort and Spa in Phuket, Thailand. “Staff should be encouraged to talk about this, whether during training, daily briefings or in one-to-one communication with management.”

She adds, “Senior staff and management, including the general manager and owners, need to make it clear from the start of anyone’s employment that employees will have their support if an incident arises. Just this fact alone, knowing that management has their back and are actively pushing these policies, gives staff the confidence to deal with a situation.”

Beata Aleksandrowicz, founder of the Pure Massage Spa Training Method, suggests taking this support one step further by creating a flow chart of action and reaction to help staff identify the chain of command when an incident occurs. “It’s about ensuring therapists understand who they go to and what will be done with the information that is relayed,” she says. “Even if the spa manager has the day off, there has to be someone available to end the treatment.”



## 5 Have a clear in-room service procedure

Extra vigilance is required where services are offered away from the spa environment. Thomson says: “We should be alert to some of the misconceptions and stigma that exists in certain seedy parts of the market, and never take for granted that customers think our way.”

For therapists asked to provide in-room services, Sunai Wachirawarakarn, managing director of the Arom:D Life spa concept, which has branches in Thailand and China, advises creating a clear procedure to ensure the safety of staff and guests. “Therapists should inform the manager on duty, or security, that an in-room service is taking place,” he says.

## 6 Take a stand

Hewitt reminds us: “This is one of the few jobs in the world where an individual works inside a closed room, with a stranger who is basically disrobed.” Prevention of sexual harassment and ensuring the safety of spa staff in their place of work is the responsibility of the entire industry.

“For the first time, we’re openly discussing and tackling the issue worldwide and taking back control,” says Overman. At the end of the day, therapists did not go to college or do apprenticeships to be taken advantage of once they’re in the treatment room. They trained so they could provide people with the opposite of that – a space of trust and relaxation.” **WSW**

