

## Skin - the interface between inside and outside

As a massage therapist and eczema sufferer I often reflect on skin, mine that is, sensitive and needing careful choice of soaps oils etc. Using my hands massaging the skin on my palms in particular has developed an enhanced sensitivity to the feeling of what it touches.

Much of massage speak is about depth, tissue, muscles, fascia but rarely the skin despite all lying below the surface and covered by the skin. In a way skin becomes the medium I work in or with, no matter how deep we intend to reach in the body (not sure we actually reach that far) we go through the skin.

My own experience as a massage recipient is that it is more important to have a confident and connected touch, than a just brute force, in order to have effect and depth and that there is much more interplay between the deeper inside and outside than just mechanics of touch.

Our skin is in fact our largest organ of the body and is deeply interlinked with the nervous system and it starts right the beginning when life is formed. The fertilised egg begins to divide and form a mass of undifferentiated cells, then at some point these cells start to differentiate and organise themselves into three layers; The endoderm goes on to become the internal organs; the mesoderm later becomes the musculoskeletal system; and the ectoderm becomes the brain, the spinal cord, the peripheral nerves . . . and the skin.

So our skin not only functions as a barrier between inside outside creating a boundary between internal and external, but also informs our brains about our external environment, us and that which is not us. Approximately 1,000 nerve endings per square inch of skin, on average, are constantly responding to temperature, pressure, stretch, vibration, light touch, chemical irritants, etc. The brain receiving this information, processing it, responding, then continuing to monitor both internal and external changes.

All of these helps us in our daily whereabouts keeping us safe and orientated in space and room.

When it comes to massage it primarily the somatosensory system involved in the perception of touch (mechanoreceptors) and pain called nociceptors (not only found in the skin but all through the body) that comes into play.

When we put our hands on the client's skin in a treatment, mechanoreceptors at the sensory nerve endings are stimulated. Impulses are generated that travel up the nerves, up the spinal cord, and to the brain. There, the impulse is interpreted and processed. The brain generates efferent impulses of its own that travel down the spinal cord and out into the body, creating changes. It may cause blood vessels to dilate and the heart and breathing rates to change. If the brain likes our input, it may turn down the volume on pain and tension. If the brain perceives threat from our input, it may create sensation of pain and/or causing physiological responses that usually are the opposite effect of what we want.

In a way you could say touching the skin is a way to touch the brain and by doing so it creates changes in tone and mode of the whole body, an interface, to the inside environment and the outside.

