Baby massage (BM) is by no means a ‘new’ therapy. Massaging children regularly from just a day or two after they are born is a centuries-old tradition still practised in many cultures. In India, for example, up to 96 per cent of care-givers practise traditional oil massage on their newborns, irrespective of socio-economic status or where they live. If such a tradition ever existed in the UK, then clearly it was not passed down through the generations as it was in India.

However, in recent years, BM has become increasingly popular in the West – great news as research suggests that both parties gain much benefit from this simple technique.

Best for baby

Though BM uses much gentler techniques than those of a standard Swedish massage routine, the two treatments share many benefits. For instance, BM has the potential to:

- Stimulate the circulatory, respiratory, nervous and immune systems;
- Stimulate the digestive system, which can help to relieve colic and constipation in some babies;
- Improve the appearance and texture of the skin, which can benefit eczema in some babies;
- Improve joint mobility;
- Reduce stress, anxiety and birth trauma;
- Improve sleeping patterns.

BM can also encourage smaller infants, including premature babies, to gain weight without increasing the volume of feed given.

Understanding baby cues

For most parents, having a baby is a truly wonderful life event, but it is not without stresses. The arrival of a physically vulnerable human being, which is unable to communicate its needs properly for several months, can be as daunting as it is demanding, especially for first-time parents. Feelings of anxiety, isolation and a sudden lack of self-confidence are not uncommon. Fortunately, these are all areas that BM has the potential to address.

Above all else, BM provides the perfect opportunity for the baby and carer to spend some uninterrupted, quality time together, which doesn’t involve feeding, winding, changing nappies, bathing and so on. During this time, the carer will inevitably start to recognise, understand and respond to different cues from the baby. For example, the carer may start to notice that when the baby is not in the mood for interaction – be this BM, or any other activity – he may look or turn his head away, frown, arch his back, clench his fists or start to cry. On the other hand, when the baby is ready for interaction, he may hold eye contact for extended periods, smile, move his limbs in an excited but relaxed way or make gurgling sounds.

The carer will also learn to recognise the baby’s different activity levels – deep sleep, light sleep, drowsy and alert – and at what points during the day it is best to carry out different activities, including massage. Learning to interpret the baby’s behaviour through massage will help the bonding process and increase self-confidence in the carer. This is of particular benefit to mothers suffering postnatal depression and those fathers who only have a limited amount of time to spend with their baby.

Postnatal depression

Postnatal depression, or PND, affects approximately 1 in 10 mothers in the UK every year – that’s 75,000 women. Women who are at a greater risk of developing PND are those who experienced a traumatic birth; have physical health problems as a result of the birth (for example, urinary incontinence); have a demanding baby; do not have physical or emotional support from friends and family; have a poor relationship with their partner; have had mental health problems in the past or during pregnancy.

Vivette Glover, Professor of Perinatal Psychobiology (Imperial College, London), is involved in ongoing research into the benefits of infant massage for mothers with PND. In a paper published in Seminars in Neonatology (2002), Glover highlights a number of points. For instance:

- Studies have shown that women with...
Baby massage has been practised in some countries for centuries and is undergoing a revival in the west – good news for babies and parents alike.

PND often have problems relating to their new baby.

- Children of women with PND tend to do less well later in life, in terms of both behaviour and intelligence.
- Parents attending a massage class can potentially feel less isolated and have the opportunity to share information and advice with others.
- Massage has the potential to improve mother-infant interaction as ‘classes specifically encourage mothers to look at and understand their babies, as well as interact with them in a pleasurable manner’.
- While psychotherapy and drug treatment may have a role to play in treating PND, such approaches do not directly improve mother-infant interaction.
- Through massage, the parent’s self-esteem can improve as they start to see the positive effects of this activity.
- The parent learns about the baby’s skin, including its texture, tone and temperature.
- It has been claimed that massaging infants may improve neuro-psychological development, sleeping patterns, weight gain, and relieve constipation and colic.

Glover concludes the paper by pointing out the potential cost benefits of including infant massage instructors in postnatal services at maternity hospitals, particularly as ‘a recent study highlighted that crying and sleeping problems in the first 12 weeks costs the NHS £65 million a year in consultations with health visitors and GPs’.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING
2. www.womenatrisk.org.uk
3. www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk