

In South Korea, Massage: A Profession Reserved for the Blind Since 1912



In South Korea, a unique legal provision has drawn attention: for over a century, only blind individuals are allowed to become licensed massage therapists. A law enacted in 1912, during Japanese occupation, aimed to ensure employment opportunities for visually impaired people, who were often excluded from the workforce. This regulation, while unusual, continues to shape the field of massage therapy in the country.

A Historical Measure with Lasting Impact

At a time when job options for blind individuals were scarce, this law provided a pathway to professionalization and recognition. Today, it is still championed by many associations advocating for the rights of the visually impaired, who view it as a way to safeguard the livelihoods of a vulnerable group. Proponents argue that massage, requiring exceptional tactile sensitivity, is particularly well-suited for the blind, who often develop an enhanced sense of touch.

In practice, blind massage therapists play a central role in licensed medical centers and spas, and their skills are widely acknowledged. They undergo rigorous training, culminating in official certification that attests to their expertise.

The Downside: Discrimination Against the Sighted

However, this law is not without controversy. By legally restricting access to this profession, it implicitly discriminates against sighted individuals interested in pursuing massage therapy. Many sighted practitioners resort to operating illegally, offering unlicensed massage services. While their skills may be equally valid, they face severe penalties, including hefty fines and even imprisonment.

This situation creates tension between the two groups. Blind massage therapists criticize unlicensed sighted practitioners, accusing them of jeopardizing their livelihoods. Meanwhile, sighted massage therapists advocate for reform, arguing that competence in this field should not be determined by vision.

Debates Over Reform

The possibility of revising this law has been a topic of discussion for years. Some propose a dual system, where blind individuals retain preferential access to the profession, but sighted individuals can also work legally after completing rigorous training. Others fear that such reforms would lead to unfair competition, potentially undermining the economic security of blind massage therapists.

Despite these debates, South Korea remains one of the few countries to tie a profession to a specific disability through legislation. While this model has its flaws, it reflects a historical commitment to inclusion, raising complex questions about balancing social protection with professional equity.

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