

What is Fascia? : Unveiling an Obscure Anatomical Construct

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BACKGROUND Increasing international visibility of a growing raft of bodywork therapies raises questions about the theoretical underpinning of these clinical practices. Practitioner-written publications frequently hypothesize that the clinical application of bodywork techniques results in health-enhancing changes to the structure and function of fascia, however these assertions have yet to be established by research. A generally minimal, inexact, and sometimes ambiguous approach to fascial description arguably confounds clear recognition and understanding of this anatomical construct; and potentially constitutes a barrier to scholarly investigation of bodywork therapies.

PURPOSE The aim of this study was to review literary definition of fascia, with the intention of seeking an answer to the rudimentary question ‘what is fascia?’

METHOD This literature review made primary use of forty-five anatomical definitions of fascia retrieved from a Google powered Internet search (n=25), medical dictionaries (n=15), and general dictionaries (n=5). The content of these definitions was analyzed in relation to information given about fascial structure, composition, characteristics, location and function. The findings of this survey were subsequently compared to descriptions of fascia published in a range of anatomical and bodywork texts.

RESULTS A diverse assortment of definitions are applied to the term ‘fascia’ in both general and anatomical contexts. The researched sample of anatomical definitions varied considerably in length and content. Most contained information about fascial composition (91%), structure (89%), and function (78%). Fewer references were made to fascial characteristics (44%) and location (36%). While there were distinct similarities between the content of the sampled definitions and those published in anatomical textbooks, there were several noteworthy differences in meaning when compared to some of the bodywork textual descriptions.

CONCLUSIONS Definitions, including anatomical definitions, are culturally mediated constructs that powerfully influence downstream perception of meaning and merit. An historic paucity of interest in the comprehensive definition of fascia should not necessarily be construed to mean this soft tissue construct has no importance in the human body. In light of evolving explanations emerging from the bodywork literature, perhaps it is timely to revisit and review the semantic platform upon which these descriptions are based.