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Charles R. Figley

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## **Fishing Lessons for Treating the Traumatized: History of the Traumatology Certification Program**

**Charles R. Figley, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>**

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*The article relates the history of the Traumatology Certification Program from its beginnings at the laboratory of the Florida State University (FSU) Psychosocial Stress Research Program in 1996, a program that emerged as a response to one of the worst acts of domestic terrorism in the United States. Along the way the Program won a prestigious award, stimulated the establishment of the Traumatology Institute at FSU as its home, created the Certified Traumatologist, Field Traumatologist, and Certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist certifications, and established fourteen other teaching institutes nationally and internationally. The Program's journey from Oklahoma City to Tallahassee to Tampa, and back to Tallahassee, are chronicled along with a description of the Program's Certification Standards, the courses, and the people who are part of this history. The final section of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining, reviewing, and improving the standards of practice for the field of traumatology, the certification standards that support such practices, and the accreditation standards for teaching institutes that teach the sanctioned courses. As a result there are more assurances that evidence-based best practices are taught with sensitivity to culture, region, nationality, language, and history. Moreover, developing competence in these best practices not only insures the protection of the public, it insures that such standards will permeate all levels of professional education from the training of paraprofessionals and volunteers through the education of graduate and doctoral students.*

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**Key Words:** Traumatology, certification, training, accreditation, certification standards

It has been said, "If you feed a man fish, you feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." This was the message from State Representative Laura Boyd, PhD<sup>2</sup> and others in Oklahoma City during a trip there immediately after the first modern act of domestic terrorism: the bombing of the Federal Building there on April 19, 1995. When mental health professionals like Dr. Boyd, who at the time was the State Senator representing Oklahoma City and later ran for Governor, were asked what was needed, everyone replied "lessons for trauma recovery." They wanted training and competence to assess and treat fellow Oklahomans. Out of this request for help emerged the Green Cross Foundation, the Green Cross Projects and the focus of this article, the award-winning Traumatology Certification Program.

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<sup>1</sup> Reprints are available from the author at [Cfigley@FSU.Edu](mailto:Cfigley@FSU.Edu) or calling 850-644-9598 at the Florida State University School of Social Work. The author appreciates the editorial suggestions of Dr. Patricia L. Johnson.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Boyd had taken training with the author immediately following the San Francisco earthquake in 1989, invited the author to tour the site of the bombing, and recommended trauma training after reviewing the needs of her community.

### **Training for Trauma Recovery and the Move to FSU**

What was needed in 1995 was a program of training, not just a one-day workshop. Among other things, what was sought was knowledge of the history, theories, and research supporting methods of helping the traumatized in a variety of contexts. Also, Oklahoma mental health professionals wanted the skills of assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of trauma-related symptoms and syndromes. Finally, they wanted, under proper supervision, the necessary competence to apply this knowledge and skill in actually working with the traumatized. To meet these expectations of knowledge, skill, and competence, the Traumatology Certification Program was born with the support of grants to the Florida State University Psychosocial Stress Research (PSR) Program. Initially, it was called the Green Cross Registered Traumatologists (RT) Program. In the spring of 1996 there was a graduation in which 56 Oklahomans received the first RT.

Florida State University's Center for Professional Development,<sup>3</sup> which was very experienced in professional training, offered to work with the PSR Program to offer the five courses<sup>4</sup> leading to the Green Cross Registered Traumatologist status at the Center so that professionals in the community of Tallahassee could take the courses, along with those traveling from outside the area.<sup>5</sup> The Traumatology Institute emerged as the replacement for Green Cross, which by then was primarily a disaster-oriented humanitarian organization which focused on helping community-based organizations cope with traumatic events like the Oklahoma City bombing. Six and a half years later the Green Cross would utilize some of those trained in Oklahoma City in 1995-1996 in New York City at the request of a local international union who had 1700 of its members working in the World Trade Center buildings at the time of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack.

### **From Registered to Certified Traumatologists**

In addition to offering the five Green Cross core courses, FSU wished to assume responsibility for the Green Cross Project's Registered Traumatologist Program. Based on market research and a legal review, it was recommended that the Registered Traumatologist be replaced with the designation of Certified Traumatologist. The

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<sup>3</sup> With the assistance of Jay Braden, Bruce Mancigli was especially enthusiastic and served as the initial administrator of the Certification Program and was instrumental in the Program receiving the UCEA Best Program for 2000 Award. Eric Gentry was especially helpful to the author in the start of the program and served on the Founding Faculty of the Institute along with Anna Baranowsky, Louis Tinnin, Kathy Regan (now Kathy Regan Figley), Gary May, and others who taught in the initial offering of courses in Oklahoma City (e.g., Francine Shapiro, Tom Williams, and Gerald French).

<sup>4</sup> The courses were labeled Traumatology 101 (orientation to trauma), Traumatology 102 (orientation to clinical traumatology), Traumatology 103 (skill in one of the approved treatment approaches), Traumatology 104 (contextual applications), and Traumatology 105 (supervised practice).

<sup>5</sup> Travelers came from across the United States and Canada, Europe, Africa, South America, Australia, and New Zealand.

Traumatology Institute together with the Green Cross would issue the new certifications for Field Traumatologist and Registered Traumatologist, a certification rather than a registration. Thus evolved the Traumatology Certification Program. Identical in name and educational objectives to the five courses offered initially in Oklahoma City, the courses were offered by the new FSU Traumatology Institute in the spring of 1998.

### **Adding the Field Traumatologist Certification**

In recognition of the different needs of non-mental health professionals such as nurses, first responders, journalists, teachers, and others, the Institute established the Field Traumatologist certification in addition to the Certified Traumatologist certification. Field Traumatologists must complete the Traumatology 101 course that provides the proper orientation to the field, especially crisis intervention, knowledge and skills of crisis intervention methods, and a thorough awareness of incident command structure and other information critical for helping following a traumatic event. However, those acquiring Certified Traumatologist certification must take not only Traumatology 101 (Field Traumatology), but also the four other courses that include expertise and competence in at least one trauma treatment, and then receive 20 hours of individual supervision working with the traumatized.

### **The Traumatology Institute Franchise and Partnership with the Green Cross Projects**

Among the more innovative elements of the Traumatology Institute's training and certification program was the Traumatology Institute franchise. Approved training institutes would pay a minimal "site license" fee and be authorized to offer the same five-course curriculum. By 2003 there were more than a dozen affiliated traumatology teaching institutes in South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and throughout the United States<sup>6</sup>. The strength of this innovation was that more people had more access to the standard curriculum that was now taught by those who lived near the students and could provide a proper context for the material being taught and also coordinate or provide supervised clinical experiences. This was in contrast to most certification programs. Such programs often forced trainees to travel long distances at great expense and were less able to show appreciation for the culture, region, language, and history of the trainees.

Another innovative element of the Program was the close working relationship with the Green Cross (now called the Green Cross Projects). Any profits from the Traumatology Institute's training and certification program would be shared equally by FSU, the Traumatology (training) Institute, and the Green Cross Projects. This was

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<sup>6</sup> Sanctioned US teaching institutes in the Traumatology Certification Program include Miami, West Virginia, Memphis, Knoxville, Washington (DC), Indiana, Denver, and Portland. International teaching institutes are located in Argentina, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and South Africa

important because the Green Cross Projects provided the opportunities for graduates of the Program to apply their skills in communities affected by disasters<sup>7</sup>. Membership in this humanitarian service organization was restricted to those who achieved either Registered or Certified Traumatologist certification or its equivalency<sup>8</sup>. Those who earned certification were offered admission to the Green Cross Projects. By 1998 the Green Cross had formed its own organization. By 2001 it had acquired non-profit status with the US Internal Revenue Service. Each member received the international journal, *Traumatology*.

Based on the first year of the Traumatology Certification Program, the University Continuing Education Association named it the “Best (non-credit) Program of the Year” at its annual meeting in San Diego in 2000. The Program grew in the number of sanctioned training institutes with site licenses and began to offer off-site training and educational programs to the public (e.g., the Military Traumatology Program to the US Army<sup>9</sup> in August, 2000 and the compassion fatigue training to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in October, 2000).

### **In Search of Increased Enrollment: The Move to Tampa**

Despite the Traumatology Institute’s awards, off-site programs and affiliated institutes, it became clear that in order to maintain enrollment, the Program needed to move to a location that was more accessible and had a larger population base than Tallahassee. In August 2001 the Certification Program moved to Tampa, Florida at the University of South Florida. Under the direction of Dr. Michael Rank and Eric Gentry, the program flourished. Although no fundamental changes were made to the course objectives<sup>10</sup>, a number of changes took place in Tampa. First the International Traumatology Institute was established both to differentiate from the Tallahassee Institute at FSU and to emphasize the move toward greater internationalization of the Program. The number of sanctioned training institutes grew from 8 to 14. Recognizing the need for independence, ITI began to issue certifications that were independent of the Green Cross Projects. As expected, in its first year, the Program was the second most profitable at USF. This was due in part to the horrific events of 9-11 but mostly it was the strength of the Program offerings and the innovative and tireless efforts of the International Traumatology Institute co-directors.

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<sup>7</sup> A good example of this training into practice process is Kenneth Fowler’s experience of serving with the Green Cross Projects in New York City in response to the 9-11 terrorist attack months before he acquired his RT and CT certification.

<sup>8</sup> This includes, for example, those who acquired Certified Trauma Specialists from the Association for Traumatic Stress Specialists.

<sup>9</sup> The author was assisted by Kathy Regan (now Kathy Regan Figley).

<sup>10</sup> The educational objectives of the Program’s five courses would be converted to Certification Standards when the Program moved back to Tallahassee under the auspices of the Academy of Traumatology’s Commission on Certification and Accreditation.

### **Separation From the Training Institute and Returning to Tallahassee**

In 2003, with the International Traumatology Institute and its course offerings remaining intact, a decision was made to move the Certification Program to a private certifying body<sup>11</sup>. The certifying body that acquired the Traumatology Certification Program was the Academy of Traumatology<sup>12</sup>. The Academy was established in 1997 for the purposes of recognizing the international leaders in the field of Traumatology and establishing standards of practice for the field. Under the support of the Green Cross Foundation, established in the same year, the Academy assumed responsibility for the international journal, *Traumatology*; began electing members (now 46) of the Academy; and established the first and only Standards of Practice for Traumatologists in the field. Although earlier the Program had moved from Tallahassee because of its small population, returning the Traumatology Certification Program to Tallahassee where the Academy is based, without requiring a move of the training program eliminated this concern.

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<sup>11</sup> There was a consensus of the ITI and USF administrators that the ITI training program could not flourish until the certification function became independent of its training function since there was at least the appearance of a conflict of interest (i.e., how the same institutions could both offer training and certify it).

<sup>12</sup> The Academy of Traumatology web site is at [WWW.TraumatologyAcademy.Org](http://WWW.TraumatologyAcademy.Org) where members of the Academy are listed. Each were elected by their peers to this prestigious group.

## Academy of Traumatology

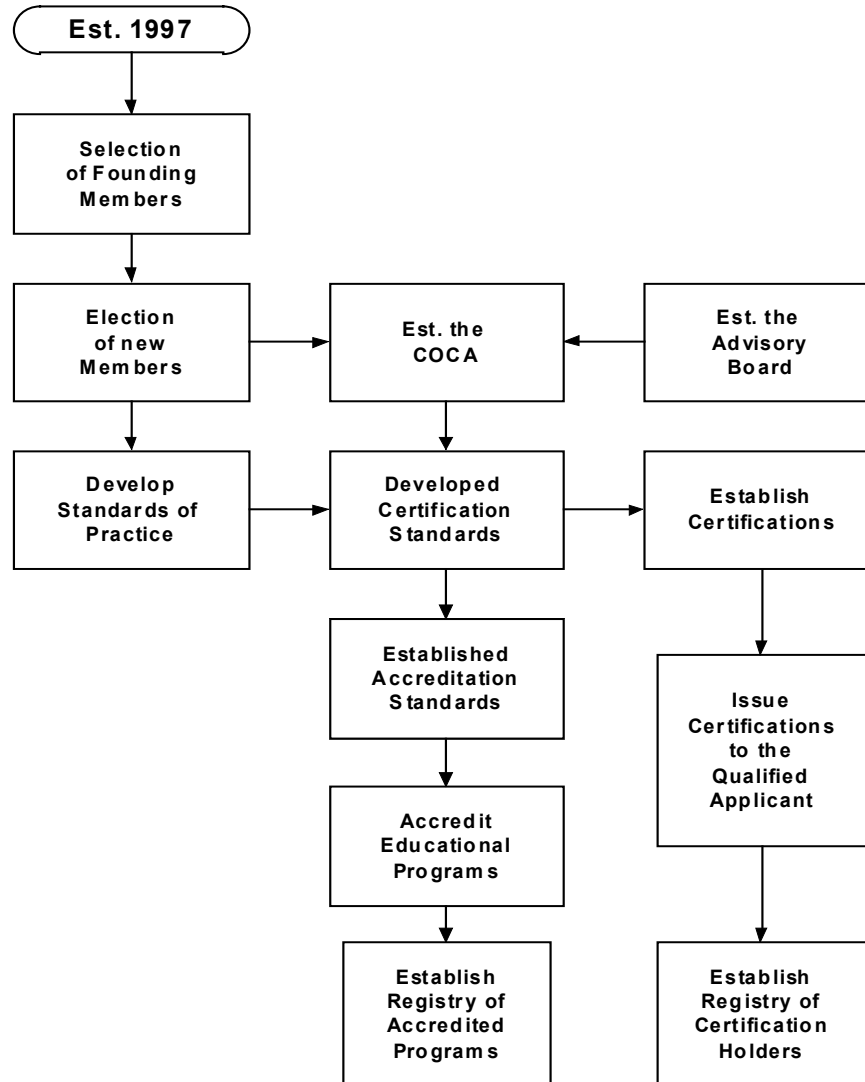


Figure 1: The History and Role of the Traumatology Academy in maintaining the Traumatology Certification Program.

In anticipation of the acquisition of the Certification Program, the Academy established the Commission on Certification and Accreditation (COCA)<sup>13</sup>. The Commission is composed of 6 elected Commissioners and is advised by the COCA Advisory Board composed of current and future traumatology training institute directors<sup>14</sup>. In recognition of the more than 300 certification holders, the COCA maintains a website that lists each person's name, contact information, and areas of specialization. COCA requires holders to verify their continuing education. COCA also urges holders to read and contribute to the journal, *Traumatology*. Currently COCA is seeking accreditation from the US Department of Education. COCA also plans to begin accrediting trauma training programs that teach the certification standards, including but not limited to the more than a dozen sites established before 2003. In summary, as Figure 1 illustrates, after the select membership was established in 1997 the Academy set the Standards of Practice for the Field in 1998. The Academy then established the Commission on Certification and Accreditation (COCA) and the Advisory Board in 2003 to administer the Traumatology Certification Program and the new accredited training institute programs.

## Conclusions

By moving beyond focusing on treating only the traumatized, one client at a time, to developing accredited training guided by standards of practice and certification, there will be far more and better help for the traumatized. The Academy of Traumatology's Commission on Certification and Accreditation continues to facilitate "fishing lessons" for trauma treatment. The Commission provides guidance to current and proposed traumatology teaching institutes who wish to become accredited. Both certification and accreditation are done through an open and transparent process by which standards are evaluated and established policies and procedures are improved. The Commission works closely with its Advisory Board composed of traumatology educators who are, in turn, continually advised by current traumatology certification holders to update and improve the Standards of Certification and Accreditation. Moreover, such a recursive system of constantly re-evaluating standards, policies, and procedures has many advantages. In addition to continually improving standards of practice, certification, and accreditation, based on published research and practice innovations it insures the protection of the public through better training and education of professionals to treat, study, and assess

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<sup>13</sup> Founding Commissioners of the Commission include leading traumatology educators in the field: Anna Baranowsky, PhD (Canada); Michael Rank, PhD (Florida); Frank Ochberg, MD (Academy); Louis Tinnin, MD (West Virginia); Mary Beth Williams, PhD (Virginia), and; Charles R. Figley, PhD (Academy), Chair.

<sup>14</sup> Founding members of the Advisory Board to the Commission include Anna. B. Baranowsky (Canada), Sam Bernard (Tennessee-South), Eduardo Cazabat (Argentina), Teresa Descilo (Florida-South), J Eric Gentry (Florida-West), David Henson (Colorado), Jim Hussey (Oregon), Ignacio Jarero (Mexico), Peter Jones (South Africa), James Martin (Oklahoma), Michael G. Rank (Florida-West), Rick Ritter (Indiana), Louis Tinnin (West Virginia), Carlos Velazquez (Puerto Rico), Joe Williams (Oklahoma), and Mary Beth Williams.

them. With evidence that these standards affect quality of services, the Commission has a better chance of influencing the education and training of those who work with the traumatized at all levels of professional education from the training of paraprofessionals and volunteers through graduate and doctoral education. At the same time, the Commission seeks to increase the visibility, quantity, and effectiveness of traumatology services worldwide.

For over five years the Certification Program has grown, adapted, and flourished from its origin in the ashes of Oklahoma City to its new home in Tallahassee, Florida. Those who are interested in seeking training, certification, or accreditation are urged to contact the Academy at [WWW.TramatologyAcademy.Org](http://WWW.TramatologyAcademy.Org).