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AWARENESS OF PHYSIOTHERAPY AMONG GENERAL PRACTITIONERS: A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Physiotherapy is a form of rehabilitation science which helps to make a difference in an individual's ability to live an active and healthy lifestyle. For many physiotherapists working in India, the primary source of reference is a physician. An aware physician can timely refer patients for physiotherapy who can in turn plan an effective management without making the rehabilitation journey taxing. This article will serve us to know about the interest and acceptance of physiotherapy and also to determine the extent of awareness among general practitioners.

Methods: A sample size of 150 subjects were randomly chosen. The study was conducted in a questionnaire based interview format. All willing general practitioners from various streams along with super specialists were included, whereas interns and unwilling practitioners were excluded.

Subjects were briefed about the study, written consent was taken before hand, and a validated questionnaire was personally given to fill in the details. The response thus obtained, was taken up for further analysis.

Result: From the study, it was learned that there is awareness regarding physiotherapy among general practitioners. With regards to the different streams of physiotherapy, the Orthopedic (36%) and Neurological fields (24%) are the most popular, followed by Cardio respiratory (16%), Sports rehabilitation (14%) and only 6% aware of community-based rehabilitation.

Conclusion: The study revealed that there is full awareness of physiotherapy among general practitioners. Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy showed good awareness among the study subjects. This was followed by NeuroPhysiotherapy, Cardio respiratory and Sports Physiotherapy. However, community-based rehabilitation was least known. Also, physicians believe that prescribing exercises is the main intervention used by a therapist and there is less information regarding the recent advances in rehabilitation.

Keywords: rehabilitation, general practitioners, awareness, physiotherapists, healthcare, medical students.

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INTRODUCTION

Apart from Allopathy, India is blessed with different indigenous systems of medicine where each system aims at encouraging good health. They are the Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Homeopathy, Yoga, and Naturopathy. Our health care depends on all these systems, and according to the National Health Bill introduced in 2015, health is a fundamental human right, making the medical management an important necessity for all. To dispatch a suitable and appropriate form of treatment, many of these systems go hand in hand with the physiotherapy care.

In India, health services are delivered by a heterogeneous plexus from both public and private providers, who vary from single doctors, specialty to “super-specialty” tertiary care corporate hospitals. These caregivers or physicians, (who are a part of delivering health services and form an important pillar of the health system), come with varied specialties; and it has been observed that they have a weighty leverage on various health professions where each employee of the health maintenance system works for the betterment of mankind, including physiotherapy, since they are at the “top of the pyramid” of healthcare profession [1].

History suggests that physical therapy was being administered even before the term ‘Physical therapist’ was coined. Physicians like Hippocrates and Galen, who are considered as the first practitioners of physical therapy; supported techniques which are widely used now, with outstanding results, for massage, manual therapy, and hydrotherapy to treat people in the 460 BC [2].

In a study by Shimpi et al. (2014) [3] it was discerned that the awareness of physiotherapy among various general practitioners still hovers as a question to be solved. And although the roots of physiotherapy in India were laid back in the nineteenth century, it remains as a dependent referral profession not just in India, but in other countries as well [3]. As a profession, physiotherapy has evolved over the years from humble forms of physical therapies to advanced physiotherapy services.

The year, 2017, denotes the completion of 65 years of physiotherapy in India [3] and thus, necessitates the need to further assess the growth of physiotherapy knowledge amongst our country’s caregivers.

Physiotherapy could be defined as a health care profession concerned with human function and movement and maximizing its potential. It uses physical approaches to promote, maintain and restore physical, psychological and social well-being, by taking account of variations in health status [3]. Physical therapists or physiotherapists, as they are better known in the country, offers services that maintain, repairs and expands people’s maximum functional ability. It can be beneficial to people at any stage of life, i.e. it can be of use from womb to tomb.

Since physiotherapy is associated with identifying, functioning and augmenting movement potential within the limitations of promotion, rehabilitation and prevention [4]

is achieved by performing a systematic assessment of the various systems of the human body including pain and help remedy it by the application of a broad range of proficiencies such as the kinesiotherapy, electrotherapy and mobilization techniques. When body functioning is threatened by aging, diseases or environmental factors, individuals can benefit from physiotherapy. It helps in maximizing the quality of life, by keeping in mind the bigger picture and working on the physical, mental and social well-being of an individual [3]. But most importantly, at the heart of this, all is the patient’s involvement, dedication and will power.

Today, physiotherapy is used in a multitude of disease conditions which could be of musculoskeletal origin like joint pain, stiff shoulder, a fracture, any sports related injury or any other complaint. For neurological conditions like stroke, parkinsonism, cerebral palsies, spinal cord traumas and several other ailments, physiotherapy has proved beneficial not only by making patients independent but also by making them live their life with dignity and confidence. In community-based afflictions, physiotherapists are known to treat disease conditions affecting the geriatric population, antenatal and postnatal care for new mothers, stress incontinence, prolapsed and other concerns related to women’s health and work in the promotion and maintenance of general health and fitness among the people. Apart from this, it even helps individuals with cardio respiratory and general surgical conditions (like asthma, tuberculosis, post-surgical cases such as cholecystectomy, rehabilitation of patients with intensive care unit, burns and other conditions.)

Due to its non-invasive and cost effective techniques, physiotherapy is rapidly gaining popularity among the people, but despite the recognition and advances, there are just a few researches done in India to evaluate its awareness among clinical doctors. Although physiotherapists practice independently of other healthcare services and also within interdisciplinary rehabilitation programs, the method of practicing physiotherapy as a first contact profession is infrequent since they often depend on referrals from practitioners from different fields [5]. This has caused great concern to physiotherapists worldwide who have to depend on physician’s practice of “prescribing physiotherapy [6].”

The growth and development of physiotherapy not just as a branch of health care but also regarding career and ground-work is dependent on the awareness of referring physicians and their acceptance of it. Since a physician’s clinic is the primary reporting center in any condition, a physician awareness of the increasing advancement in physiotherapy and the role of a physiotherapist in a wide range of disease conditions can give timely references. He can help the patient understand his need for physiotherapy and initiate his rehabilitation process by acting as a link between the therapist and the patient, developing clear lines of communication and thereby making the rehabilitation journey a truly healthy and holistic experience. Even in the medical field, the words of the renowned Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Awareness is like the sun, when it shines things are

transformed,” hold merit.

A good awareness of the entire health care system and not just the role of physiotherapy in healthcare delivery might create an impact by reducing the hospital stay, providing prompt recovery and mostly in the rehabilitation journey for an improved lifestyle which is the ultimate goal of any healthcare employee.

The stories with happy endings in medicine often begin with, “Early the detection, early the intervention.” A physician aware of physiotherapy can immediately refer to the therapist and help plan an effective management without making the rehabilitation journey taxing. Thus, this article will serve us to know about the interest and acceptance of physiotherapy and will also determine the extent of awareness among the general practitioners.

The authors of this study hope that this paper initiates valuable information which could be used to further enhance the knowledge for physiotherapy not just as a noninvasive health system, but also as an emerging profession.

METHODOLOGY

The sample size was of 150 subjects which were randomly chosen. The study was conducted in a questionnaire based interview format in medical institutions, private set ups and tertiary care hospital in Mumbai. In the study, all willing general practitioners from various streams like Bache-

lor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS), Bachelor of Homoeopathic Medicine and Surgery (BHMS), Bachelor of Ayurveda, Medicine and Surgery (BAMS), Bachelor of Unani Medicine & Surgery (BUMS) along with specialists and super specialists were included, whereas interns and unwilling practitioners were excluded.

Subjects were briefed about the study. A written consent and a validated questionnaire were personally given to fill in the details. The response thus obtained, was taken up for further analysis.

RESULTS

The data was entered using Microsoft Office Excel (version 2007) and subjected to analysis. Frequency and percentage were used as a summary statistics and represented using a simple table.

The study revealed that there is 100% awareness about physiotherapy among general practitioners.

With regards to the different fields of physiotherapy, the orthopedic and neurological fields are most popular. Less commonly known fields included cardio respiratory and community-based rehabilitation. Among the various sources of awareness among the general practitioners, the predominant source was found to be during their graduation.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of items examined in the questionnaire.

TOPIC QUESTION	SUB QUESTION	FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION (Out of 150 subjects) Positive responses
1. Source of information about Physiotherapy	a. During Graduation	86 (57.33%)
	b. Hospitals & Medical Centre	102 (68%)
	c. Mass Media	10 (6.66%)
	d. Colleagues	67 (44.66%)
	e. Word of mouth	43 (28.66%)
2. Job of physiotherapist	a. Ortho rehabilitation	123 (82%)
	b. Neuro rehabilitation	111 (74%)
	c. Intensive care rehabilitation	31 (20.66%)
	d. Women's health	9 (6%)
	e. Geriatric rehabilitation	3 (2%)
	f. Sports injuries	52 (34.66%)
	g. Burns	18 (12%)
	h. Prescribing Orthosis & Prosthesis	7 (4.66%)
3. Knowledge of various specializations	a. Neurosciences	36 (24%)
	b. Cardio respiratory	24 (16%)
	c. Community-based rehabilitation	9 (6%)
	d. Musculoskeletal rehabilitation	54 (36%)
	e. Sports	22 (14.66%)

4. Awareness of course duration	a. Bachelor's	110 (73.33%)
	b. Masters	102 (68%)
	c. PhD	12 (8%)
5. Interventions used by a physiotherapist: according to general practitioners	a. Exercises	150 (100%)
	b. Massage	80 (53.33%)
	c. Electrical Modalities	99 (66%)
	d. Mobilization	122 (81.33%)
	e. Heat therapy	106 (70.66%)
	f. Cryotherapy	89 (59.33%)
	g. Drugs	30 (20%)
	h. Pressure points	76 (50.66%)
6. Knowledge of physiotherapy centers in locality		82 (54.66%)
7. Role of physiotherapy in health sector		
	a. Very important	82 (54.66%)
	b. Important	50 (33.33%)
	c. Not important	2 (0.1%)
	d. Don't know	4 (2.66%)
	e. No response	12 (8%)
8. Need for physiotherapy centers in hospitals		138 (92%)
9. Need for lectures on physiotherapy		134(89.33%)
10. Should patients visit physiotherapy centers on references		54 (36%)
11. Are patients referred for physiotherapy by the subjects?		131 (87%)
12. Cases referred for physiotherapy	a. Orthopaedic	41 (27.33%)
	b. Neurological	25 (16.66%)
	c. Cardiorespiratory	10 (6.66%)
	d. Geriatrics	0
	e. Fitness	3 (2%)
	f. Paediatrics	20 (13.33%)
	g. Women's health	11 (7.33%)
	h. Sports injury	21 (14%)

DISCUSSION

The intent of the study, to determine the awareness of physiotherapy among general practitioners, was based on the belief that insight of doctors on important aspects of health care should be assessed at regular intervals.

According to the analysis of the obtained data, it was observed that of the total interviewed sample of 150 subjects, 100% were aware of physiotherapy, the results of which were similar to the study conducted by Acharya R S et al. (2011) [7]. Shimpi et al.(2014) [3] in their survey had a similar finding in which it was noted that the referring medical professionals had a good awareness of physiotherapy practices, apart from having some variations in the reference of patients. Similarly, our study subjects' depth of physiotherapy remains an area to be addressed and shall be

discussed separately.

Through the responses obtained, it was noted that 57% learned of the physiotherapy field while pursuing their graduation. This could be because many subjects had studied from institutions which offered multiple courses including physiotherapy. Followed by this, information gathered next was through hospitals and medical centers (68%), colleagues (44%), word of mouth (28%) and the least was through mass media (6%). Since most of the general public is dependent on mass media for acquiring information on health and illness [8] and as our study also sheds light on the least form of informational source (i.e. mass media), it makes us realize that to have a better understanding of a physiotherapist's job and to enlighten the masses, there is an acute need to encourage awareness through broadcast-

ing, newspapers, brochures among other forms of media. Regarding the field's academical knowledge among the subjects, the study helped us to know that 73% were aware of the course duration of bachelor's degree in physiotherapy, where as 68% were aware of the master's program. Only 8% claimed to have an idea of the Ph.D. program suggesting that the doctorate course is not quite well known among the subjects. However, this assessment cannot be considered unfortunate, because, not all institutions offering bachelor's course offer post-graduation master's and doctorate courses and hence, it can be assumed that physiotherapy as a profession and as a health care facility still has scope for development.

Additionally, when the subjects were asked to opine on what their perception of the role a physiotherapist was in the health care facility, it was observed that majority (82%) felt that the job of a therapist is to treat pre/pos toperative orthopedic patients. And although there are studies done in the past by Box et al. (2002) [9] which shows the benefits of post operative physiotherapy, a therapist's role in the preoperative stage cannot be neglected as studied by Fransen (2002) [10], Deyle (2000) [11] and Sherin (2005) [12]. However, neuro rehabilitation is in demand among the subjects (74%) as they believe it to have a role in making patients functionally independent.

In developed countries, physiotherapy has a crucial part in the assessment and rehabilitation of patients in the ICUs[7], to manage cardio-respiratory, neurological and musculoskeletal complications. But surprisingly, according to our study, physiotherapists are not very popular in giving treatment to intensive care unit patients, as only 20% agree to therapists treating patients in intensive care, whereas as high as 79% were oblivious of patients benefiting from physiotherapy treatment in these setups. Thus, we can form a basis that the role of the physiotherapist in cardiac and pulmonary conditions (as these are some of the major areas affected the most in critical patients), is less known. And hence, the need for physiotherapists to collaborate further with cardiologists and pulmonologist, so that time references are given to plan an effective treatment strategy.

According to the current President of the Indian Association of Sports Medicine, Dr. Parag Sancheti, Sports Medicine (which also includes physiotherapy), is not only for the elite sports persons of India but also at the grass-root level. However, for a country of sports enthusiasts, surprisingly, only 34% subjects agreed that physiotherapists play a role in treating sports related injuries. This makes us conclude that the branch of sports physiotherapy, as a further specialization is not very well known in the country.

Among the other, less known roles of a physiotherapist, knowledge of therapists treating women's health issues like urinary incontinence or prolapsed is deficient since only 6% subjects stated that to be one of the many job descriptions of a therapist. Similarly, just 12% subjects were familiar with the job of a physiotherapist in treating patients

with burns even though it is the 6th most noteworthy cause of accidental death in India [13].

The study subjects did not much support the idea of therapists prescribing prosthesis and orthosis; as, only 4% agreed with it, while the rest did not consider it as a role of a therapist. So, physicians need to be made aware that therapists, as a team working majorly for the rehabilitation of patients, have the knowledge and skill to decide the requirements of the patients.

A knowledgeable doctor can give timely references and reduce not just the extent of damage, but also time and finances utilized for the health care. To see if the subjects were aware of the various specializations, so that references can be given to their field of expertise, subjects were asked to comment on the fields of work they were aware of, and it can be stated that as many as 96% were well-informed about the various fields with majority (36%) knowing about musculoskeletal rehabilitation, neurosciences (24%), cardio respiratory (16%), sports rehabilitation (14%), though only 6% subjects were aware of community-based rehabilitation. This puts forward the need for physiotherapists to take initiatives to increase awareness for community-based rehabilitation and sports rehabilitation which can be achieved by conducting health camps for patients, seminars for doctors and practical sessions. Community-based rehabilitation, in which it was noted that just 8% subjects were aware of the role of a therapist, is more subjective and since it works on different systems of the body, a brochure or a pamphlet addressing different issues faced by the people, along with the idea of a therapist's role, could help promote this arena of specialization.

Our project study also intended us to know about the awareness in the interventions used by a physiotherapist. It was noted that physicians were unaware of the fact that for treatment protocols like iontophoresis, drugs (80%) were used by the therapists. Other interventions used according to the subjects were: pressure points (50%), massage (53%), cold (59%), electrical modalities (66%), heat (70%) and mobilization (81%). However, all subjects (100%) agreed that physiotherapists use exercises to treat patients stating that to be the primary role of a physiotherapist.

Although physiotherapy as a topic was introduced to subjects (57%) during their graduation, of the total number of subjects, 89% were of the opinion that physiotherapy lectures should be conducted for medical students. In another study done by Al-Eisa et al. (2016) [14] it was reported that the concept and approach of administering physiotherapy among the medical students are low as they had received little formal education about the field and this suggests that the future of our health system needs more information about the physiotherapy services. If early on in their academics, the young minds are given an idea about physiotherapy, inappropriate beliefs about physiotherapy career can be avoided.

To know their personal opinion of the field, surprisingly, only 31% were willing to encourage their family/friends

to become a physiotherapist. Whereas, 69% chose otherwise by mainly stating meagre pay scale, little knowledge amongst the patients, dependency on other doctors and considering it as a female dominated profession as the reasons for not favoring the noble profession. Additionally, however, when the subjects were asked to comment on the perception of the role of a PT in the health sector, 54% regarded physiotherapy as very important, whereas 8% chose not to respond, thus showing us their hesitancy towards the field. Supporting this, only 40% subjects felt that there is a need for a family physiotherapist.

The majority of subjects (92%) consider physiotherapy centers as a must in all hospitals, but their knowledge of physiotherapy centers (54%) in their locality was found to be less. Nevertheless, all subjects gave a common opinion that physiotherapists contribute to the well-being of individuals.

The idea of practicing first contact physiotherapy is an old debate as only 36% subjects believe that direct contact practice must be allowed. Many still are of the opinion that physiotherapy consultation should be given when the physicians refer physiotherapy and not before. As to back this idea, 87% of our study subjects claimed that they recommend patients for physiotherapy, which is slightly more significant than the clinical doctors of Nepal, where the referral rate was found to be 63% as study conducted by Acharya et al.(2011) [7]. In our study, the cases referred for orthopedic rehabilitation (27%) was the highest. The result obtained is similar to studies conducted by Childs et al.(2005) [15], Cremin MC, Finn AM (2000) [16] and Acharya R S et al(2011) [7], in which it was reported that practitioners consider the art of physiotherapy to have a huge hand in the rehabilitation of musculoskeletal conditions. This also makes us realize that general practitioners are confident in a physiotherapist's ability in managing musculoskeletal problems [7, 16, 17, 18]. The other cases referred for physiotherapy were neurological (16%), sports injuries (14%), paediatrics (13%), women's health (7%), cardio-respiratory (6%) and fitness (2%). Based on the results, we can conclude that poor referral system points towards knowledge deficit in evaluative procedures and modalities. Even with having an awareness of physiotherapy among the subjects, there is not just a contradiction, but also an inadequacy of referral systems [19].

The limitation of this study was that it was conducted in a constrained geographical area and the experience of the subjects was not co-related to the awareness in the study subjects.

The authors would like to suggest that mutual understanding is established between the general practitioners and physiotherapists so that timely references are given with effective marketing strategies to enhance the field further. Regular surveys should be done to know the extent of physiotherapy skill among the health care professions and communities so that the goal of maximum awareness is attained.

Thus, with this, we can formulate that overall physicians are aware of physiotherapy, but the role of a therapist and the knowledge of its various specialization and interventions is an arena which can be improved further. A combined effort by both physician and therapist can indirectly create an increased awareness within the public and help draw bridges.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that there is full awareness about physiotherapy among general practitioners. Musculoskeletal and neurophysiotherapy are popular amongst the subjects under study. Whereas community-based rehabilitation, especially geriatric rehabilitation, and women's health were least known. Also, it can be noted that there is less accuracy about the job of a physiotherapist, especially in treating patients with burns or in intensive care units. Subjects believe that prescribing exercises is the main intervention used by a therapist and showed reduced awareness for the use of drugs. Even though there is a division of opinion, many practitioners still believe that patients should visit physiotherapy centers only on references.

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APPENDIX : 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

(Please ✓ in the appropriate box)

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESPONDENT

NAME:

AGE:

GENDER:M/F

QUALIFICATION:

CLINICAL ADDRESS: Practicing Since ___ years

1. Are you aware about Physiotherapy?

YES NO

IF YES,

a. How did you know about Physiotherapy?

- During Graduation
- Through Hospitals/ Medical centers
- Mass Media
- Colleagues
- Word of Mouth

2. What according to you is the job of a physiotherapist?

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Manages Neuro rehabilitation			
Manages Pre/Post-Operative Ortho rehabilitation			
Manages ICU patients			
Prescribes Orthosis and Prosthesis			
Manages patients with Burns			
Gives on-field treatment for Sports injuries			
Manages Geriatric rehabilitation			
Manages Women's health			

3. Was physiotherapy introduced to you as a topic during graduation?
 YES NO
4. Do you think there should be a lecture on physiotherapy for medical students?
 YES NO
5. Are you aware of the course duration of B.Pth in India?
 YES NO

If yes, how many years?
 _____ years.

6. Are you aware of Masters in physiotherapy?
 YES NO
7. Are you aware of Ph.D in physiotherapy in India?
 YES NO
8. Are you aware of various specializations in physiotherapy?
 YES NO

- If yes,
- Physiotherapy in Neurosciences
 - Physiotherapy in Cardio respiratory
 - Physiotherapy in Community Based Rehabilitation
 - Physiotherapy in Musculoskeletal Sciences
 - Physiotherapy in Sports Rehabilitation

9. What according to you are the interventions used by a Physiotherapist?

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Exercises			
Massage			
By use of Electrical modalities			
Mobilization			
Application of Heat Therapy			
Application of Cold Therapy			
Drugs			
Pressure Points			

10. Like a family physician, do you think there is a need of a family physiotherapist as well?
 YES NO
11. Do you think that Physiotherapy centers should be available in all hospitals?
 YES NO
12. What is your perception of the role of Physiotherapist in the health sector?
 Very Important
 Important
 Not Important
 Don't Know
13. Do you think that Physiotherapists contribute to the well-being of individuals who seek their services?
 YES NO
14. Do you think a patient should visit a Physiotherapy center only on the reference of a doctor?
 YES NO
15. Do you recommend Physiotherapy services to your patients who need them?
 YES NO
- IF YES,
 Which cases have you referred?

-
- Orthopedic cases
 - Neurological cases
 - Cardio respiratory cases

Other:

- Geriatrics
- Fitness
- Pediatrics
- Women's health
- Sports Injury

16. Would you encourage your family members/friends to become a Physiotherapist?

- YES NO

17. Are you aware of any physiotherapy center in your locality?

- YES NO

ANY COMMENTS/ SUGGESTIONS WITH RESPECT TO PHYSIOTHERAPY?
