

Physiotherapy Students' Awareness of Community Health in India

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The study aimed to provide inputs that would help to promote Community Physiotherapy as a field of future study and work. While the focus was on undergraduate physiotherapy students' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs regarding this field of specialisation, the study also attempted to find whether there were variations in attitude depending on which year of the programme the students belonged to.*

Method: *In December 2015, 118 students of a private physiotherapy college in Gujarat, India, took part in a self-administered questionnaire-based survey. Of these, 56 students were in the third year of their course, while the rest were in the final year. Written informed consent was taken from each respondent.*

Results: *While it was a positive finding to note that this cohort viewed physiotherapy as a service profession, majority of the students wished to pursue higher education outside India due to their perceptions about lack of adequate training facilities, salaries and scope for the profession within the country. For the majority, Musculoskeletal sciences was the preferred area of specialisation, followed by Community Health. However, there was awareness about the importance of Community Physiotherapy.*

Conclusion: *Among undergraduate physiotherapy students in the study sample, Musculoskeletal sciences is the preferred specialisation, followed by Community Physiotherapy. The year of the programme in which they were studying did not significantly affect their attitudes towards Community Physiotherapy.*

Limitations: *The sample size was too small to compare the differing attitudes of participants from different batches of the course. First and second-year students could not be included since the specialisation of Community Physiotherapy is introduced only in the third year.*

Keywords: *Area of physiotherapy specialisation, physiotherapy education.*

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INTRODUCTION

Community Health is not a preferred area of specialisation among physiotherapy students (Ohman et al, 2002; Rajan, 2012, 2013). The awareness about rural rehabilitation among students in different health professions is limited across the globe (Sharifian et al, 2015). Currently, 68% of the Indian population lives in villages as per the World Bank (2015). The need for Indian physiotherapists trained in the field of Community Health cannot be emphasised enough (Rajan, 2014a, 2014b).

The year of the programme plays an important role in the understanding of the student (Jeffe et al, 1998). In the study by Jeffe et al (1998), a comparison was done between second, third and final year students in a medical school in the United States. The authors concluded that the timing of introduction of concepts is important as it affects the attitude towards and knowledge about a particular subject. More the clinical exposure, greater was the understanding of the student about the subject (Jeffe et al, 1998; Wessel and Larin, 2006). Teaching could help change the attitudes and beliefs of students regarding a particular subject (Latimer et al, 2004).

Published research in the field of Community Health in India is scarce (Rajan, 2015). Hence, there is not much evidence on effective teaching strategies to promote Community Physiotherapy among students. The main aim of this study was to provide useful inputs, based on the perceptions of physiotherapy students in India, to educators in the field of Community Physiotherapy so that it can be promoted as a field of future study and work. One part of the study was conducted with post-graduate students from the same teaching institution (awaiting publication). While a lot of conflicting responses about Community Physiotherapy were reported by the post-graduate students, it was of interest to study the perceptions of the undergraduate students about the subject.

Objective

The current study aimed to:

1. Describe the attitudes and beliefs of physiotherapy students about Community Physiotherapy; and,
2. Investigate whether these attitudes change depending on which year of the programme the students are in.

METHOD

Study Sample

In December 2015, 118 students from a private physiotherapy college in Gujarat, India, took part in a self-administered questionnaire-based survey. This questionnaire was piloted in Pune, India, (Rajan, 2015). Of the 118 students, 56 were in the third year of the programme while the rest were final year students.

For the purposes of this study, third and fourth-year undergraduate students of physiotherapy were chosen. Students in years 1 and 2 were excluded as the course on Community Physiotherapy is introduced only in year 3. In year 4, the students have a graded compulsory advanced course in Community Physiotherapy with theory and practical components (case presentations and community visits).

Written informed consent was taken from each respondent.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted in a closed room with the author (and no faculty present), and the data collection took 15 minutes to complete. This was a single blind study as neither the respondents nor the author knew each other personally and professionally. The third and the final-year students assembled on two consecutive days as per their availability for this survey. For the purposes of this paper Group A consisted of third-year students and Group B consisted of final or fourth-year students.

RESULTS

The background characteristics of both the groups are discussed in Table 1. Majority of the students in both groups were female, and the average age was 20-21 years.

Table 1: Background Characteristics

	Group A (n=56)	Group B (n=62)
Average age (years)	20	21
Percentage of Female Respondents	84	92

Why Physiotherapy?

The respondents were asked whether physiotherapy was their first choice at the time of seeking admission for undergraduate studies. The picture was similar in both the groups. Physiotherapy was not the preferred choice for 59% of the respondents in Group A and 44% in Group B. The common reasons given by students in both the groups were lack of awareness about physiotherapy (Group A: 18%; Group B: 7.4%) and preference for other professions (like medical sciences and dental sciences) over physiotherapy (Group A: 79%; Group B: 89%). For those who opted for physiotherapy as their first choice, the common reasons were interest in the field (Group A: 65.2%; Group B: 85.7%), and good prospects like service and going abroad (Group A: 30.4%; Group B: 8.5%).

Future Plans

The respondents were then asked about their plans after completion of physiotherapy studies. The detailed responses are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Plans after Programme Completion

	Group A (n=56)	Group B (n=62)
Physiotherapy Master's Degree in India	21.4%	22.6%
Physiotherapy Master's Degree outside India	46.5%	38.7%
Work as Physiotherapist in India	10.7%	16.1%
Work as Physiotherapist outside India	10.7%	6.5%
Change Profession	1.8%	4.8%
Not sure	8.9%	11.3%

While over 60% of the students in each group expressed their desire to pursue higher education, a little over 20% in each group wished to take up work after completion of the Bachelor's programme. Close to 5% of the students in the final year wished to change their profession; while around 10% of the students in each group were not sure about their future plans.

Higher Studies in Physiotherapy

In Group A, the reasons for pursuing physiotherapy Master's Degree outside India were: better scope abroad (42.3%), better education and research facilities (19.2%), better salaries (19.2%), and settling abroad (11.5%). In Group B, the

reasons reported were: better scope abroad (41.7%), settling abroad (37.5%), and no scope and future for physiotherapists in India (8.3%). The respondents in Group A, who wished to pursue physiotherapy Master's Degree in India, wanted to do so because they wished to serve people (58.3%) and join academics (25%). Those in Group B who wanted to do the same gave their reasons as furthering their knowledge of physiotherapy (35.7%) and serving people in India (35.7%).

Work after Completion of Physiotherapy Studies

Giving their reasons for pursuing work in India after completing their studies, students in Group A cited service to people in India (50%) and working to increase awareness about the profession in India (33.3%). Students in Group B, as well, wished to work in India to serve people (40%) and improve clinical knowledge (20%). The reasons for working outside India were similar in both the groups, as represented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Reasons for pursuing Work outside India

	Group A (n=56)	Group B (n=62)
Settling abroad	33.3%	50%
More scope abroad	33.3%	25%
Better salaries	33.4%	25%

Over 5% (n=3) of the respondents in Group B wished to change their profession; the chosen field was management studies. No specific reasons were stated, except for one respondent who expressed lack of interest in physiotherapy. The students who were unsure, in both the groups, were planning to make a decision after completion of internship.

Area of Interest in Physiotherapy

The respondents were asked to report their future area of specialisation, either for work or study. The detailed responses have been reported in Table 4.

Table 4: Preferred area of Specialisation after completion of Physiotherapy Studies

	Group A (n=55)*	Group B (n=62)
Musculoskeletal Sciences	32.1%	30.7%
Community Health	23.2%	19.4%
Cardiopulmonary Sciences	12.5%	3.2%
Neurosciences	10.7%	16.1%
Not sure	17.9%	25.8%

* One student did not answer.

* Note: The percentages will not add up to 100% since the students who wished to change their profession are not included in the above Table.

The first choice of students in both the groups was Musculoskeletal Sciences, indicating high levels of interest in this study sample. Community Health was perceived as an interesting area of specialisation by approximately 20% of the students in each group. While 16% of the students in Group A were not sure which area to choose for further study or work, the percentage of undecided students was higher in Group B.

Why not Community Physiotherapy?

The students who were not keen on pursuing study or work in Community Physiotherapy were asked their reasons. In Group A, the students who wished to pursue a career in Musculoskeletal Sciences found Community Physiotherapy uninteresting (72.2%) and difficult (11.1%); whereas those in Group B gave their reasons as uninteresting (47.4%) and no idea about Community Physiotherapy (26.3%). In Group A, students who were inclined to take up work or studies in Neurosciences perceived Community Physiotherapy to be uninteresting (33.3%), difficult to understand (33.3%) and monetarily less rewarding (16.7%); while in Group B, students who wished to pursue Neurosciences found Community Physiotherapy to be uninteresting (30%), stagnant with no growth (20%) and knew nothing about it (10%). Among those keen on Cardiopulmonary Sciences, students in Group A reported that Community Physiotherapy was uninteresting (42.9%), a difficult profession (14.3%) or had no idea about it (14.3%); while in Group B, the respondents were either not interested (50%) or had no idea about Community Physiotherapy (50%).

Community Physiotherapy as an area of Future Study and Work

Students who chose not to pursue Community Physiotherapy were requested to give their views, as the primary aim of the study was to understand student perspectives in order to develop strategies to improve the profession. As opposed to this, students who opted for Community Physiotherapy would give positive insights and there would not be much scope to make improvements. The detailed analyses are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Community Physiotherapy as an area for Future Study (number of students)

	Group A (n=31)	Group B (n=30)
Musculoskeletal Sciences	Good (9)	Good scope (5)
	Uninteresting (3)	Good (3)
	Difficult (2)	Diverse (2)
	Diverse (2)	Uninteresting (2)
	Unanswered (2)	Needs more awareness (2)
		No idea (1)
		Difficult (1)
		No scope (1)
		Unanswered (1)
Cardiopulmonary Sciences	Good (1)	Diverse (1)
	Difficult (2)	No idea (1)
	Diverse (1)	
	No idea (1)	
	Not aware (1)	
	Unanswered (1)	
Neurosciences	Good (2)	Good (3)
	Difficult (1)	Good scope (2)
	Diverse (1)	No idea (2)
	Not monetarily rewarding (1)	No interest (2)
	Unanswered (1)	Unanswered (1)

Table 6: Community Physiotherapy as an area for Future Work (number of students)

	Group A (n=29)	Group B (n=31)
Musculoskeletal Sciences	Good scope for service (8)	Good scope for service (8)
	Not monetarily rewarding (3)	No idea (3)
	Uninteresting (1)	Uninteresting (2)
	Interesting (1)	Needs more awareness (1)
	Difficult (1)	Diverse (1)
	Unanswered (3)	Difficult (1)
		Unanswered (3)
Cardiopulmonary Sciences	Good scope for service (3)	Diverse (1)
	Needs more awareness (2)	No idea (1)
	No idea (1)	
	Not monetarily rewarding (1)	
Neurosciences	Good scope for service (3)	No idea (4)
	Needs more awareness (1)	Good scope for service (3)
	Unanswered (1)	No interest (2)
		Needs more awareness (1)

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to understand physiotherapy students' perspectives about Community Health as a field of future study and work. It was also of interest to find out whether the understanding of the field was influenced by the year of the programme in which the students were. The study found that students seemed confused about this field, irrespective of the year of the programme in which they were studying. While Community Physiotherapy was perceived to be an uninteresting, difficult profession, it was also considered rewarding in as much as it offered scope for service.

In a study on Swedish physiotherapists by Ohman et al (2001), it was found that female physiotherapy students preferred to keep their options open, as opposed to male physiotherapists who were more focussed and clear about their future goals. The current study had maximum number of female respondents in both the years and only 14 male respondents (Table 1). Close to 10% of the students (including 2 male students) were not sure about their plans after completing undergraduate studies. Hence, the current study had findings similar to the

previous work regarding gender of the respondents. Future studies in India can be planned to include greater number of male physiotherapy students so as to understand their perspectives.

In the study by Weesel and Larin (2006), changes in the attitudes of the physiotherapy students in the same year, from their first to third clinical placements, were recorded. It was found that the students were more confident and more knowledgeable in their third placement as compared to the first. It is interesting to note that the final year respondents (n=7) in the current study seemed equally confused about their future choices as compared to the third-year students (n=5) (Table 2). This is contrary to the findings of Weesel and Larin (2006). Greater the knowledge about different specialisations, as is usual towards the end of the programme, greater could be the interest in more than one specialisation. However, this study sample was smaller and the respondents had a fair idea about their future plans after graduation. Also, although majority of the students from both the third and fourth years had not opted for physiotherapy as their first choice, it was encouraging to find that almost all of them wished to either study or work in the field of physiotherapy; only 3 students wished to change their profession. This could be due to the greater number of opportunities available at the training institution, including good mentorship that had sustained students' interest in physiotherapy. This is an important finding. While there is scarcely any published research on training pedagogy in physiotherapy in India, students abroad have provided good feedback on the existing pedagogy and curriculum (Futter, 2003;Ernstzen, 2009; Mostert-Wentzel et al, 2013), which has helped the training institutions to further this profession. The pedagogy and curriculum being followed at this training institute seems effective in providing the necessary encouragement and knowledge to physiotherapy students. Such educational models could be replicated in other training institutes in the country.

While it was a positive finding to note that this cohort viewed physiotherapy as a service profession, majority of the students wished to pursue higher education outside India due to their perceived lack of adequate training facilities, salaries and scope for the profession within the country. This could be based on the students' interactions with physiotherapists from abroad who are frequently invited to this training institution. Such interactions could be utilised to bring about changes in the profession within India so that the country's higher education programmes in physiotherapy would be of more interest to students. India is greatly in need of physiotherapists, specifically those trained in preventive Community

Physiotherapy. Creating a conducive environment by providing better training facilities, better salaries and increasing awareness about the importance of this profession could help retain this pool of professionals in India.

Musculoskeletal Sciences was the preferred area of specialisation for majority of the students. This is not a new finding as it has been noted in previous studies on Indian physiotherapy students (Rajan, 2012, 2013). Community Health was the second preferred specialisation, which is indeed a finding unique to this study; previous studies in India having reported Community Physiotherapy as a neglected profession (Rajan, 2012, 2013). This could again be due to the opportunities that students have at this particular training institute, to gain knowledge and foster their interests (Jeffe et al, 1998; Latimer et al, 2004). Therefore, such models could be replicated in other institutes to help increase the number of students interested in working as community physiotherapists.

However a contradiction to this was also observed. Students from other specialisations viewed this field as uninteresting and difficult, and expressed their dislike for the profession. Awareness about the importance of Community Physiotherapy is not only lacking among communities but also among students. Community Physiotherapy was perceived to be a diverse area that encompasses many specialisations. This being the case, students who choose other specialisations, could be included in the teams that visit communities.

The importance of good communication skills in Community Physiotherapy was highlighted in this study. A team of physiotherapists led by a well-trained community physiotherapist could prove useful. For this, the awareness and importance of Community Health among other specialisations in physiotherapy needs to be emphasised. This could be done through seminars, workshops, conferences and other public forums. It could help increase the number of physiotherapists (could be non-community specialisation) who come together to improve community health. Since the majority of the students identified good scope for service in Community Physiotherapy as a profession, this could be tapped to create effective teams of physiotherapists in Community Health.

CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to understand the physiotherapy students' perceptions about Community Physiotherapy as a specialisation. Among undergraduate physiotherapy students in Gujarat, India, the preferred specialisation was

Musculoskeletal Sciences, followed by Community Physiotherapy. The year of the programme in which they were studying did not significantly affect their attitudes towards Community Physiotherapy. It is hoped that the findings from this study will help physiotherapy educators to improve awareness and interest among physiotherapy students regarding this important field.

Limitations

The sample size was not large enough to understand the differing attitudes of students belonging to different years of the study programme. Students in years 1 and 2 could not be included since the specialisation of Community Physiotherapy is introduced only in year 3.

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