

The importance of physiotherapists in promoting sustainable community-based health programmes to improve long-term health outcomes

CHALLENGE THE TRADITIONAL PHYSIOTHERAPY ROLES

There is no question that physiotherapists play a vital role in specialised areas of clinical evaluation and treatment techniques. What is less certain is the role physiotherapists systematically play in long-term, sustainable health and wellness promotion efforts within communities across the world. One of the first articles calling for physiotherapists to promote health and maintain functional independence for people with disabilities by emphasising community-based health promotion initiatives was by Dr James Rimmer who, in 1999 wrote "Health Promotion for People with Disabilities: The Emerging Paradigm Shift from Disability Prevention to Prevention of Secondary Conditions" for the *Physical Therapy Journal*. Seventeen years later, there is still a need to connect our expertise in health and wellness to community-based programmes that provide long-term opportunities for regular exercise and active lifestyles with peers (Rimmer 1999). Dr Alan Jette in his 43rd McMillan Lecture called for the physiotherapy profession to be "...a central player with other professions in devising, evaluating, and implementing cost-effective health care innovations for communities as well as for individuals..." (Jette 2012). This vision encourages us as physiotherapists to think beyond our traditional clinical roles and to take leadership roles in non-traditional applications of our expertise for use in community-based settings.

COLLABORATE WITH TEAM MEMBERS WHO HAVE COMPLEMENTARY EXPERTISE

Rehabilitation teams may include therapists (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, recreational therapists), nurses, social workers, and physicians. Each team member brings a different perspective to the treatment plan. One strategy for examining recommendations for post-discharge community-based health promotion programmes would be to encourage input from the team members as to their recommendations. These perspectives may include information about the patient's resources (eg transportation, family or caregiver assistance), mobility considerations (eg ambulatory status, safety issues), hobbies and interests (eg ideas for promoting long-term adherence). By including information from these complementary perspectives, the patient's lifestyle, physical and cognitive abilities, and motivational desires can be considered in order to maximise a successful programme fit.

SEEK OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANDING EXISTING COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES

Consider seeking out opportunities for expanding existing community-based programmes by adding health components that could benefit the constituents of those existing programmes. For example, many community centres

offer specialised programmes for their constituents. Those programmes may include instructional classes on a variety of topics (eg meal preparation, financial planning, etc.). Often those same community programmes have constituency groups who are seeking information about topics that can improve their lives (eg senior centres, after school programmes, neighborhood centres, faith-based programmes). Approach the directors of these types of centres within your communities to see if you could offer your expertise in areas related to health and wellness (eg exercise programmes, home mobility safety tips, among others). Collaborating with professionals with complementary expertise would also be a good way to customise your health promotion programme. For example, you could partner with a nutritionist to provide a workshop on exercise and healthy eating tips. Attaching a health promotion programme onto an existing community-based one is a good way to initiate a programme for a ready-made audience.

INCORPORATE FACTORS TO PROMOTE LONG-TERM PROGRAMME ADHERENCE

Sustainability of community-based health promotion programmes may be difficult to establish. It may be helpful to first conduct a survey of potential participants to determine the types of activities they may find to be stimulating. They will be more likely to initiate and sustain their involvement with a community-based health promotion programme if it includes activities they find to be interesting and motivating. Another strategy for promoting initiation and sustainability is to encourage peer involvement in the programme. Many people are motivated to attend programmes if their peers attend, so customising the activities to include social interaction may improve adherence.

IMPROVE LONG-TERM HEALTH OUTCOMES

One of the ultimate goals for promoting sustainable community-based health programmes is to improve long-term health outcomes for the people who participate in these programmes. Consider providing some type of health benefit measurement for the participants as a way of promoting long-term adherence. For example, partner with a local health clinic who may visit the community site once every few months to conduct blood pressure screenings or other health-based services. This information may help the participants to see a long-term benefit to the community-based health activities that could motivate them to continue participating in the activities.

CONCLUSION

Physiotherapists are uniquely qualified through their extensive training to evaluate and treat people with many types of

diagnoses. We should also use our expertise to promote health and wellness beyond the clinic in community-based settings as a way of improving long-term health outcomes for our patients.

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