

Knowledge and Beliefs Regarding Physiotherapy among General Population: An Exploratory Cross-Sectional Survey

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ABSTRACT

Physiotherapy is an established health-care profession that assists individuals in maintaining, improving, and restoring body functions to live a disability-free life. Lack of education and awareness among the general population may affect the use of physiotherapy care. At large, awareness and beliefs affect the autonomy, growth, and utilization of physiotherapy services. Therefore, a cross-sectional survey of the general population was conducted to investigate knowledge and beliefs. The survey yielded a total of 138 responses. The survey consisted of three sections: introduction, essential information, and questions related to knowledge and beliefs about physiotherapy (PT) practice. The majority of the respondents were aware of physiotherapy (87%). A low level of awareness was found about consulting a physiotherapist as the first contact practitioner; 69% ($n = 95$) of respondents said they needed a referral for physiotherapy services. Most study participants, 87% ($n = 120$), lacked awareness of various specialties in physiotherapy. Some prevailing beliefs were identified within the population, with 88% ($n = 122$) holding the notion that "physiotherapy is always painful." In addition, most respondents expressed that physiotherapy services are crucial for patients in the intensive care unit. Although the study participants were aware of the term physiotherapy, many other domains related to physiotherapy need to be highlighted, and the public needs to be informed about the scope of physiotherapy practice and its role in the health-care system.

Keywords: Beliefs, Knowledge, Perception, Physiotherapy, Public health, Survey, Utilization

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INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy (PT) is a firmly established health-care discipline dedicated to aiding individuals in preserving, enhancing, and recovering bodily functions, fostering a life free from disability.^[1] It deals with various conditions affecting human functions ranging from musculoskeletal, neurological, cardio-respiratory, and sports-related injuries.^[2] In the present health-care landscape, physiotherapy plays a crucial role by fostering health and preventing and addressing diverse disorders that impede an individual's quality of life.^[3] Physiotherapy is an autonomous profession and an essential component of a multidisciplinary approach.^[4] World Physiotherapy proposes that physiotherapists can act as the first contact, assess patients, make a diagnosis, offer preventive advice, refer to other specialties, and treat and provide health services. In a multidisciplinary health-care system, physiotherapists work in community rehabilitation, post-operative rehabilitation, and specialized fields.^[5]

Knowledge of physiotherapy among the general public is vital in seeking PT care.^[6] Knowledge is critical for seeking care from physiotherapists; therefore, a lack of awareness and knowledge can hinder PT care.^[7] Literature suggests that being aware of health care services is directly proportional to effective utilization.^[8] In a developing nation such as India, physiotherapy services primarily focus on musculoskeletal disorders. This is because public awareness is limited to the role of physiotherapy in specific musculoskeletal areas and not extended to other specialties.^[9,10]

Moreover, physiotherapy services are generally better approachable to the urban population than rural ones. The other factor in seeking PT care when needed is the lack of public education and awareness in public. Health awareness and utilization are affected by sources of belief and can vary among communities. These beliefs may influence health behaviors when they lack an evidence base.^[11] Physiotherapists should dispel the prevalent negative

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beliefs to enhance approachability and trust among the public. To improve access to physiotherapy services, exploring people's beliefs and knowledge regarding physiotherapy is essential. Therefore, the study aimed to explore the knowledge of physiotherapy among the general population. The other aim of the study was to gain insights into the beliefs about physiotherapy practice among the population.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

Knowledge and beliefs were explored using an online cross-sectional survey.

Respondents

The respondents were required to be 18 years of age or above. They must be able to comprehend English and should have

internet access and an understanding of online surveys. Prior knowledge of physiotherapy or any other medical knowledge was not a prerequisite. Health care professionals were excluded from the survey.

Procedure and Instrumentation

The survey was designed on Google Forms and circulated online through social media. Anyone with the above-mentioned selection criteria can submit the responses. As it was an exploratory and preliminary survey for a large study, the duration of the data collection was limited to 15 days, after which the responses were analyzed. The Institutional Ethics Committee of Lovely Professional University approved the study protocol. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles laid out in the WMA Declaration of Helsinki.

The survey had three sections: The first being the introductory section. The introduction section contained consent and instructions to fill out the survey. The participation was voluntary; one can submit the survey without filling in any identifiable details. The second section had questions regarding the essential information of the respondents; no personal information was obtained. The third section of the survey had questions representing mainly two different domains; a few questions were related to knowledge about physiotherapy practice, and the rest were concerned with beliefs about physiotherapy. Two physiotherapists initially screened the survey questions. The first of whom had experience of 30 years of clinical practice, and the second had experience of 6 years. Therapists with such varied experience were selected to gain better insights into the questions. The following are the questions used in the survey:

Knowledge (Awareness)

- Do you know about physiotherapy?
- Do you need a referral to see a physiotherapist?
- Any health-care professional can provide physiotherapy services
- Physiotherapy services are essential for critical care intensive care unit (ICU) patients
- Physiotherapy has specialties for treating different disorders (example: neuro-physiotherapy, ortho-physiotherapy, etc.)

Beliefs

- Does physiotherapy (PT) management only deal with injuries and accidents?
- Physiotherapy is always painful.
- Is massage therapy the same as physiotherapy?
- Physiotherapy is an essential, non-surgical alternative most of the time.

Data Analysis

The demographic data and closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS version 21.

RESULTS

A total of 138 responses were obtained during the prescribed data collection period. The mean age of the respondents was

26.5 (10.78). The age-wise distribution of the respondents is shown in Figure 1. The females were 53 (38%), and the males were 85 (62%). Basic characteristics are highlighted in Table 1.

Knowledge

Responses concerned with awareness about physiotherapy had diverse responses. Most respondents were aware of physiotherapy; 87% (n = 120) reported that they knew about physiotherapy as a health-care profession, while 13% (n = 18) of respondents were not aware of physiotherapy. There was a low level of awareness about how to consult a physiotherapist; 69% (n = 95) respondents said you need a referral for physiotherapy services, while 31% (n = 43) said you do not need a referral to consult a physiotherapist. Regarding the question "Any health-care professional can perform physiotherapy," 60% (n = 83) said only physios having a degree could provide physiotherapy, while 40% (n = 55) said that anyone could offer physiotherapy services. The majority of participants stated physiotherapy services are essential for ICU patients; 31% (n = 83) said physiotherapy care is not a necessary service in the ICU setup, while 69% (n = 95) were aware of the importance of physiotherapy in the ICU. The lowest scores were obtained regarding physiotherapy specialties; 87% (n = 120) of people were unaware of different physiotherapy specialties, while only 13% (n = 120) were aware of PT specialties. The percentages and frequencies are depicted in [Figure 2a].

Beliefs

The study population exhibited diverse attitudes toward beliefs. Of the four myths explored, only two were found to be more prevalent.

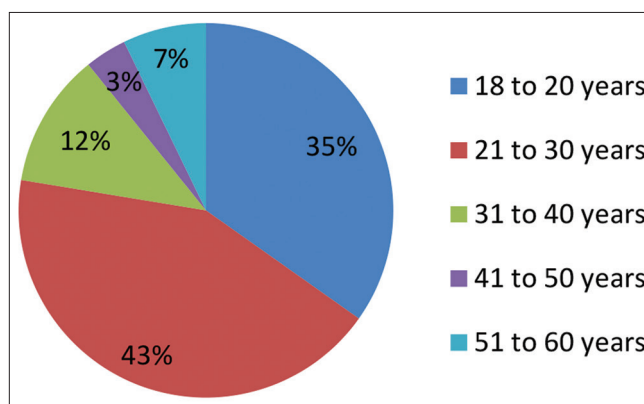


Figure 1: Age-wise distribution of study respondents (values are displayed as percentages)

Table 1: Relevant characteristics of study respondents (Figures are numbers (percentage) of respondents unless specified otherwise)

Variables	Frequencies (percentage)
Mean (SD) age (years)	26 (10.78)
Male	85 (62)
Female	53 (38)
Education level	
10+2	67 (49)
Graduate	51 (37)
Postgraduate	17 (12)
PhD	3 (2)

Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest possible whole number

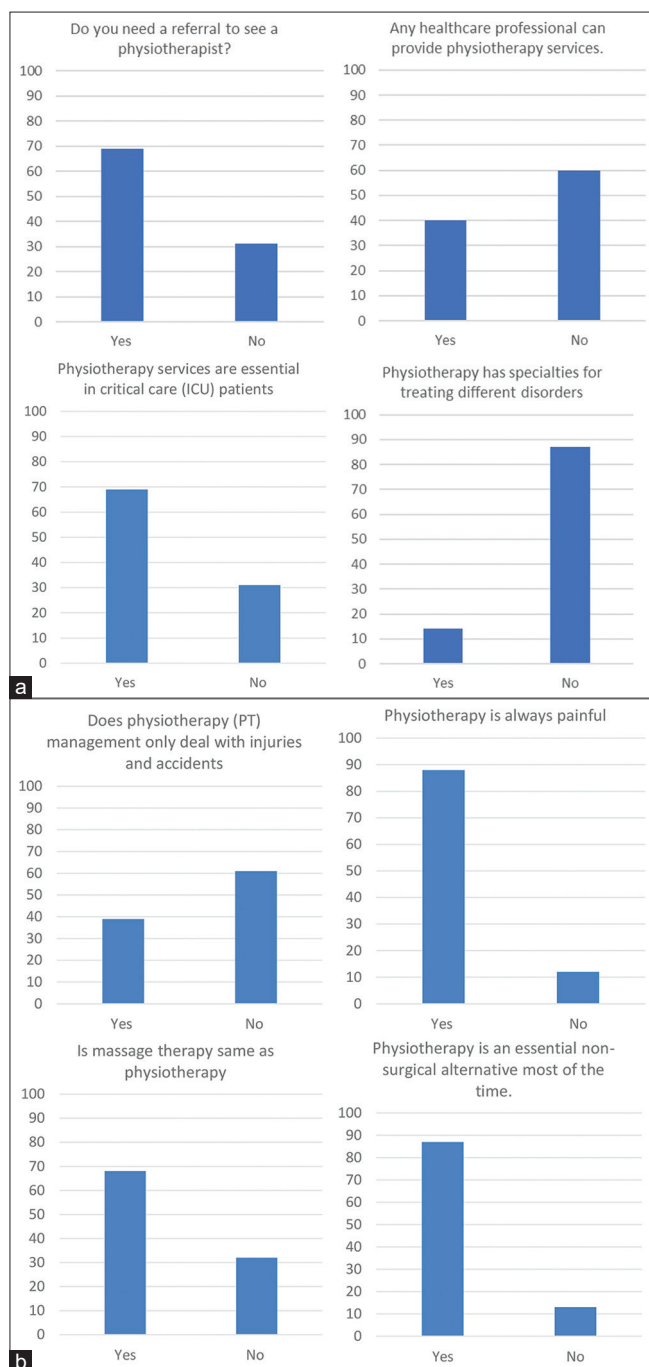


Figure 2: (a) Responses (in percentages) of questions related to knowledge. (b) Responses (in percentages) of questions related to beliefs

The myth that physiotherapy care only deals with injuries and accidents was believed by 39% ($n = 54$) of the respondents, while 61% ($n = 84$) did not believe that PT care only applies to injuries and accidents. The belief that “physiotherapy is always painful” was prevalent in the study population, as 88% ($n = 122$) responded that it was painful, while 12% ($n = 16$) considered it non-painful. 62% ($n = 86$) believed that massage therapy is synonymous with physiotherapy practice, while 38% ($n = 52$) affirmed the negative. The question “Is physiotherapy an important non-surgical alternative most of the time?” had 87% ($n = 120$) people saying yes,

while very few 13% ($n = 18$) considered it to be not an alternative to surgical options. The percentages and frequencies are depicted in [Figure 2b].

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to assess knowledge and gain insights into beliefs about physiotherapy among the general population. The study demonstrates a high level of awareness among respondents; most knew about physiotherapy practice and services but were unaware of other aspects of physiotherapy practice. Negative beliefs were prevalent among the general population.

Knowledge

In the present study, 87% of the respondents were aware of physiotherapy. This finding is similar to several studies reporting awareness about physiotherapy among the general population.^[1,2,8,9] In a survey conducted in four different cities in Gujarat, India, 85.4% of the participants knew about physiotherapy very well.^[8] Comparable findings were reported in a study conducted among senior secondary school students in Nigeria, where 71% of students were consciously familiar with physiotherapy.^[2] In the current study, increased levels of awareness can be attributed to the level of literacy among the study respondents. The studies reporting low levels (16.8%) have also reported low literacy levels.^[12] Igwesi-Chidobe^[13] demonstrated that 85.2% of respondents were not unaware of physiotherapy in his study. Literacy or education level may be an essential factor related to awareness about physiotherapy. A study investigating the public perception of the scope of physiotherapy practice suggested the absence of knowledge to be multifactorial, yet education was found to be associated with awareness of the profession.^[14]

In the present study, most participants were aware of physiotherapy, but there was a lack of knowledge regarding access to physiotherapy services. Respondents had the notion that they needed a referral to a physiotherapist. The reason can be attributed to the fact that physiotherapists are not the first contact providers in developing countries. The practice patterns for PT care vary across countries, with differences in direct and indirect access.^[15] The World Confederation for Physical Therapy’s (WCPT) policy statement suggests that physiotherapists are autonomous professionals and that the profession’s autonomy should be highly important as it signifies professional growth.^[16] Domholdt described professional autonomy as a negotiated social contract between a profession and policy elites based on the public trust in a profession to act in the best interests of society.^[4] WCPT encourages physiotherapists to move toward this construct of professional autonomy.^[16] The direct access is supported by recent studies demonstrating that physiotherapists are an efficient alternative in treating musculoskeletal disorders.^[17,18] The current study emphasizes the importance of knowledge dissemination regarding physiotherapy for first-contact practitioners.

Furthermore, respondents demonstrated high awareness regarding the need for physiotherapy services in the ICU. Participants’ awareness concerning the role of PT in the ICU can be due to their recent awareness of ICU services in the wake of the pandemic.

However, participants were unaware of other physiotherapy specialties, which agrees with previously published literature

showing that people were primarily aware of musculoskeletal services.^[1,2,8,19] Ramanandi and colleagues reported that only a few participants knew that physiotherapy services could also deal with heart and lung problems.^[8] Similar findings were reported from the study conducted among secondary school students; only 1.9% of the students knew about the role of physiotherapy in the ICU. Most of the published literature demonstrates similar findings, with the general population being aware of only musculoskeletal specialities.^[1,2,8,9] Identifying a lack of awareness among the study respondents in this area suggests that more efforts should be made to educate the public about the different domains of physiotherapy practice.

Many participants (60%) know that physiotherapy services will be provided by a physiotherapist, not other health-care providers. However, 40% answered that anyone can prescribe physiotherapy management. This is alarming and needs to be addressed in the community. Quackery is an inevitable curse in India; many non-accredited persons provide physiotherapy care, which can harm the patients and the profession. This was in accordance with a similar study, which reported that 61.8% of the participants were aware that physiotherapy care has to be provided by physiotherapists.^[2]

Beliefs

Respondents had positive beliefs towards physiotherapy management and considered it an alternative to surgical opinion. The myth that PT management is always painful was also apparently present. Many respondents (62%) believed physiotherapists were the same masseurs. Physiotherapists in India have been tagged as "masseurs" for a long time, and the study reflected the same trend. Our findings do not agree with another study conducted among school students in Nigeria. The previous study reported that many students (91.5%) knew the difference between a masseur and a physiotherapist.^[2] This negative belief can be prevalent for various reasons, one of which is that massage is a treatment choice in physiotherapy.^[20-23]

Physiotherapy management was perceived as painful by the study participants. In the PT initiative, APTA highlights that 71% of people think that PT management is painful, though this number decreases after a consultation with a physiotherapist.^[24] This negative belief needs to be dispelled, as it is suggested to be an important reason for refraining from physiotherapy consultations. On the contrary, the Center for Disease Control recommends physiotherapy as a vital treatment option over long-term or high-dosage use of addictive prescription painkillers for pain management.^[25] Physiotherapy is the safest and best option for solving the opioid epidemic.^[26] The Cochrane review highlights the evidence for physical activity and exercise as interventions for chronic pain.^[27] Recent literature suggests that physiotherapists are in the best position to tackle the increasing burden of chronic pain. In the Indian context, physiotherapists should extend educational efforts to reach the community and physicians to portray the role of physiotherapy services in pain management. This will aid in dispelling negative beliefs existing in society at large.

Respondents reported physiotherapy as an alternative treatment option for surgical care; 87% had a positive response to this statement. This aligns with recent literature suggesting opting for physiotherapy before seeking a surgical solution.^[28] The myth that PT management is only for patients with accidents and

surgeries was answered with a yes by only 40% of the respondents, while 60% disproved the myth. This is a positive finding, as the scope of practice for physiotherapists is evolving along with new evidence.^[29] The Indian Association of Physiotherapists proposes that physiotherapy's scope be multidimensional.^[30] A study evaluating the role of physiotherapists from patients' perspectives demonstrated physiotherapists should educate them about health promotion.^[31] The positive findings, in terms of beliefs, in the current study can be supported by the previously published literature.^[8,32,33]

CONCLUSION

The respondents were aware of physiotherapy in general, though they lacked knowledge in terms of accessing PT care. Referral was considered a primary requirement to consult the physiotherapist. A few negative beliefs were also found among the respondents. These can alter the way the public perceives physiotherapy as a profession. Educating the masses and making them aware of PT practice is necessary. The scope of practice and the diverse populations to which a physiotherapist can provide care must be disseminated as awareness programs. Physiotherapists and national bodies should carry out educational and other similar approaches to make the public aware of physiotherapy or services provided by a physiotherapist.

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