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Integrating physiotherapy into primary health care in Nigeria: Perceptions of primary health care practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The perception of Primary Health Care (PHC) practitioners about integrating physiotherapy into PHC in Nigeria is still unknown. The aim of this study was to examine the knowledge and attitude of PHC practitioners in Nigeria regarding the integration of physiotherapy into PHC. The participants in this cross-sectional study were 183 PHC practitioners (physicians, nurses, and community health workers). A content-validated, semi-structured questionnaire was used to obtain information about history of exposure to physiotherapy, knowledge, and attitudes toward integrating physiotherapy into PHC. Data was analyzed using Pearson's product moment correlation and Analysis of Variance at $\alpha = 0.05$. Participants were mostly females ($n = 154$; 84.2%) and aged 39.97 ± 9.38 years. The mean years of work experience was 14.41 ± 8.68 years. Participants had limited knowledge about the role and scope of physiotherapy but were willing to learn more about physiotherapy. Less than half of the participants however, had favorable attitude toward integrating physiotherapy into PHC. Knowledge differed significantly across healthcare professions ($p < .05$) and was significantly correlated with attitude ($p < .01$). Our findings underscore the importance of interprofessional education and teamwork among healthcare providers. This might enhance understanding, modify attitudes and facilitate the inclusion of physiotherapy into PHC in Nigeria. Additionally, this could improve access to physiotherapy services for Nigerians.

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KEYWORDS

Physiotherapy; Primary Health Care; PHC practitioners; perception; integration

Introduction

The concept of Primary Health Care (PHC) has existed for decades, but has recently received a renewed global attention as a means to improve access to healthcare services. The principles of comprehensive PHC require that healthcare service provision be multidisciplinary. This has increased the interest in integrating physiotherapy services into PHC (Cott et al., 2011; Samsson & Larsson, 2014). Physiotherapists make significant contributions to multidisciplinary healthcare teams through health promotion and prevention of chronic non-communicable diseases across the lifespan (Kumar, 2013; Ontario Physiotherapy Association, 2017). Growing evidence supports the role of physiotherapists as providers in PHC (Cott et al., 2011; Ludvigsson & Enthoven, 2012). Physiotherapists possess the requisite education and competencies to function in multi-disciplinary PHC teams (Dufour et al., 2014a). Providing physiotherapy at PHC settings has been associated with increased satisfaction with care among both the patients and the clinicians, decreased waiting time, increased cost effectiveness of intervention compared to institutional care, improved accessibility and affordability of physiotherapy services; and improved outcomes for patients as well as improved quality of life (Dufour et al., 2014a; Maharaj et al., 2018).

Background

Primary Health Care (PHC) plays an important role in Universal Health coverage (UHC). A multidisciplinary team

approach is however, important in facilitating UHC within PHC settings (World Health Organization, 2010a). It is essential for the multidisciplinary healthcare workforce to collaborate and communicate for meaningful and quality healthcare delivery (World Health Organization, 2010b; Kirch and Ast, 2015; Peduzzi & Agreli, 2018). To effectively collaborate, healthcare professionals need to recognize and appreciate the roles, skills and scope of practice of the different disciplines within the PHC team (Blum et al., 2022). Despite the growth in evidence-based physiotherapy practice and the increased need for physiotherapy services, physiotherapy is yet to be fully recognized as a crucial service within the PHC systems (Al-Abbad & Al-Haidary, 2016; Kumar, 2013; Puckree et al., 2011). A crucial step toward enhancing the integration of physiotherapy into PHC, is to ensure the service is acceptable to stakeholders and practitioners within PHC. The concept of acceptability in relation to a treatment or service requires that the treatment or service be suitable, appealing and satisfactory to the stakeholders (Proctor et al., 2011). These authors contend that the best way to determine acceptability is through the level of knowledge and engagement of the said stakeholders with the various components of the service under consideration. Therefore, healthcare providers' understanding of, and perception about physiotherapy could play a role in the integration of physiotherapy into PHC. Studies have investigated the perceptions of different healthcare practitioners about integrating physiotherapy into PHC. Physicians and nurses in