THE INDIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY MODEL

: COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Community physiotherapy, as a profession in India, is slowly gaining ground. However, given the current health scenario, it is difficult to incorporate community physiotherapy for the underserved communities. The sources of challenges for community physiotherapists could be from multiple sources. For the purpose of this paper, the challenges arising from the community side are discussed. In addition, a modest attempt is made to suggest solutions for a few. The major challenges include funding, availability of pool of community physiotherapists, travel to the site of interventions (which could be slums, tribal regions and/or remote areas in the country), regular visits to the site, creating a good rapport with the community, establishing a long-lasting positive relationship to achieve long-term goals, and planning and implementation of sustainable community interventions. Solutions for some of these challenges are securing funding prior to implementation, approaching a community through a local organization, and creating a greater pool of community physiotherapists to ensure long-term progress.

Key words

Rehabilitation, underprivileged, underserved communities.
INTRODUCTION

Community physiotherapy is one of the courses offered during final year physiotherapy studies in India, including a specialization during Masters program. Despite this, there seems to be a dearth of physiotherapy students who opt for this specialization or practice in this field (Rajan, 2012; Rajan, 2013). Over the past few decades, the scenario has positively improved, with more physiotherapists opting to serve the underprivileged communities (Rajan, in press). Nevertheless, given the higher proportions of underserved communities on the rise in a developing country like India, the number of the available community physiotherapists still seems insufficient. There could be many reasons for this (Rajan, 2012), one of the major and perhaps the most important one being the challenges faced while rehabilitating underserved populations.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the current paper is to identify the major challenges that physiotherapists face while rehabilitating underprivileged communities. Secondarily, it was of interest to look into solutions for some of the challenges to ensure smooth implementation of community physiotherapy projects.

METHODOLOGY

The author of this paper has been practising as a community physiotherapist in India since 2007. The challenges that have been faced so far by the author have been put forth in this paper. In addition, an attempt has been made to suggest solutions for some of these challenges.

MAJOR CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY PHYSIOTHERAPY

The challenges faced while rehabilitating communities can be classified into two: firstly, the challenges arising prior to field work, and the challenges arising during field work (please refer to Figure 1).

1) CHALLENGES ARISING PRIOR TO FIELD WORK

i) FUNDING

The major hurdle during this phase (prior to field work) is funding. It is difficult for physiotherapists to secure adequate funding for the implementation of community projects. Usually, such projects are implemented through local and/or Non-Governmental Organizations that have limited funds. Thus, the planning and implementation of ambitious projects in community rehabilitation are not easy. Physiotherapy is, in itself, a cost effective method to treat communities (Rajan, 2014). However, depending on the nature of the communities to be rehabilitated, logistics could involve the need for greater funding.

ii) TEAM EFFORT

Unlike the institution-based specializations, community physiotherapy is a team effort. Since the interventions are to be executed for large numbers, a community visit by a team is mandated rather than by one physiotherapist. Hence, creating a pool of motivated physiotherapists, who are willing to devote their time and expertise to rehabilitate a community, is difficult. There have been previous examples of team effort involving physiotherapy expertise (Rajan and Koti,
2013a; 2013b; 2013c); however these are sole isolated efforts catering to smaller numbers.

2) CHALLENGES ARISING DURING FIELD WORK

i) TRAVEL TO THE COMMUNITIES
By far, the communities that are in need of most help are usually located in remote areas of the country or in less accessible locations like tribal areas and slums. It is quite a task to reach the site of intervention even by a team of physiotherapists.

ii) REGULAR VISITS TO THE COMMUNITIES
As described in the previous paragraph on the issues related to the travel to the site of intervention, regular visits also need to be done to follow-up and monitor the progress. This can be especially difficult when the project has limited funding and the location of the community to be intervened is remote.

iii) CREATING A GOOD RAPPORT WITH THE COMMUNITIES
It is not easy to establish a good working relationship with all communities. This is one of the major challenges arising during field work. Previous studies have shown that the communities take time to develop trust in the treatment methods suggested by the team of health professionals. As well, it is difficult for a small team to attend to the issues of a large number of patients (Rajan and Koti, 2013b).

iv) ESTABLISHING A LONG-LASTING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP TO ACHIEVE LONG-TERM GOALS
Once an initial rapport is created, the next challenge is to keep the interest and the trust of the communities in the physiotherapy management to ensure long–term progress. For this, regular visits to the community are essential. However, as already mentioned, it could be challenging.

v) PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY INTERVENTION
Community physiotherapy could be a cost-effective tool, only when it creates a self-sustainable model to be run by the communities themselves for their own benefit. It is the most difficult challenge, as the needs of the communities are dynamic and these needs ought to be assessed at regular intervals for the model to be sustainable.
Figure 1. Major challenges of community physiotherapy

- Funding
- Team effort
- Travel and regular visits
- Positive relationship with the community
- Planning and implementation of sustainable community interventions

Cost-effective and long term progress of intervened communities
SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE SOME ISSUES OF COMMUNITY PHYSIOTHERAPY

The challenges encountered during community rehabilitation are many and varied. As well, there may be certain challenges that are very specific to the intervened community. While most of the issues could be anticipated, there are few challenges that might always exist, despite good planning.

Solutions for certain common challenges are discussed here. Every community project requires funding. Hence, securing adequate funding prior to project implementation is of utmost importance. There are many community organizations that could provide funding; in addition, international agencies also extend monetary assistance for the rehabilitation of underserved populations especially in India. At times, local organizations and/or Non-Governmental Organizations secure funds for projects, but lack the expertise to implement it. Approaching such organizations could help in tackling many challenges like funding, travel and regular visits, creating a positive relationship with the communities and achieving long-term goals. Also, such organizations act as a bridge between the physiotherapists and the communities and help in the implementation of long-term and sustainable projects (Rajan and Koti, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). Creating a pool of qualified and motivated community physiotherapists is the need of the hour. Such a pool could cater to the varied needs of different communities.

CONCLUSION

Community physiotherapy is an effective tool to help the underprivileged population in India. However, it comes with certain challenges. While it is possible to foresee some of them, a few are always encountered. Each community is unique and has its special needs. A pool of qualified and motivated community physiotherapists is needed to tackle the issues of these communities.

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