



## Awareness about Physiotherapy among General Public - A Cross Sectional Survey Analysis

**Shubham Menaria, Tittu Thomas James, Jarapla Srinivas Nayak\*,  
Shubhi Saxena and Pradnya Dhargave**

*Department of Physiotherapy Center, NIHMANS, India*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Jarapla Srinivas Nayak, Department of Physiotherapy Center, NIHMANS, India.

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### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** Physiotherapy is a field of medicine which deals with maximizing human functioning by treating structural and functional impairments. Although there is an increased knowledge about physiotherapy among healthcare providers, there is still lack of awareness evident among the general public. It is found that the quack practitioners and fake courses utilize this gap for malpractice. This cross-sectional survey analysis tries to identify the level of awareness among physiotherapy in general public.

**Methods:** People above 20 years of age and has the access to internet facility are provided with online survey questions. The answers were collected from them on the same day. The data collected from the online survey was collected and documented in spreadsheet. The data was analysed descriptively and analysed accordingly.

**Result:** A total of 346 people participated the study. It was found that more than 60% of the respondents are aware of the profession and treatments provided by the therapists. There is a lack of awareness in the public regarding physiotherapy because 4.6% of the respondents consider it as massage therapy whereas 9.1% consider physiotherapists as yoga trainers. 70 participants responded that physiotherapists are eligible to prescribe medications. 10.2% of them are unaware of the preventive aspect of diseases with physiotherapy.

**Conclusion:** We suggest the use of available resources including social media to increase the awareness among the general public, living in both in rural and urban areas. It is imperative to take measures by professional bodies to initiate the formation of a central regulatory body in controlling malpractice in this professional field.

**Keywords:** Physiotherapy; Awareness of General Public; Physiotherapist; Malpractice in Physiotherapy

## Introduction

Physiotherapy is a unique field in healthcare which deals with structural and functional rehabilitation of patients. According to World Confederation of Physical Therapy, "Physical therapy is concerned with identifying and maximizing quality of life and movement potential within the spheres of promotion, prevention, treatment/intervention, habilitation and rehabilitation. This encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Physical therapy involves the interaction between the physical therapist, patients/clients, other health professionals, families, caregivers and communities in a process where movement potential is assessed and goals are agreed upon, using knowledge and skills unique to physical therapists" [1].

The history of physiotherapy dates back to 460 BC where scholars including Hippocrates, Galen and others advocated techniques such as massage, manipulations, hydrotherapy, etc [2]. The polio epidemic in 1916 and the First World War increased the demand of physiotherapists for the care of affected and the injured. Mary McMillan is considered to be in the frontline of physiotherapy at this time and is considered as the first physical therapist and the founding president of Association of American Women Physical Therapy, which is now the American Association of Physical Therapy (APTA). Physiotherapy was gained prominence in India during the polio epidemic in Mumbai, followed by the commencement of the first physiotherapy school in 1953 by the government authorities along with the technical support of World Health Organization (WHO) [3].

Although physiotherapy was introduced in India for more than 65 years, the general public as well as those in healthcare lack the awareness about this field. Most of them are even unaware about the medical conditions that a physiotherapist can treat. Medical consultants are reluctant to provide advice to their patients regarding the scope of physiotherapy, which is safer with lesser side effects. This can be due to lack of poor knowledge along with ineffective communication between the disciplines of medicine [4].

In the present era, the field of physiotherapy is beyond the hospital premises. They play a major role in almost all aspects of life where human function is in demand. This include sports, schools, industries, offices and even at homes [5]. The trend of physiotherapist being the primary contact in health care is in progress, which is

also making the profession at risk. This is because of the increased number of quacks, sham treatments and fake courses. The need of increasing the awareness about physiotherapy among general public is imperative. As an introductory measure, this study is to identify the understanding and awareness of physiotherapy among general public using an online survey.

## Materials and Methods

We conducted an online survey among general public to identify the awareness of physiotherapy profession among them. The survey was conducted between June and August 2021 and was open for everyone who have the facility to use online forms and fill them. The survey excluded those who were working in the health care field, and those who are pursuing education in any medical or paramedical field. People below the age of 20 years were not included for the survey. The survey was distributed through the social media platforms. Participation consent was collected through a cover letter, and those who were interested were asked to return the filled letter through mail. The respondents were asked to fill the form according to their knowledge and not to identify the right answer to the questions through any external help. The researchers did not indulge in any conversation with the respondents so as to avoid influencing the responses. The data collected from the online survey was collected and documented in spreadsheet. The data was analysed descriptively and analysed accordingly.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 346 people participated the study. 81.5% of the total respondents belong to the age group of 20-30 years, 9.6% between 31-40 years, 2.7% between 41-50 years and 6.2% between the age group of 51-60 years. Eighty-six out of the total respondents were working in the engineering field, 40 of them in business field, 37 in information technology field, 22 in agriculture and 46 in other works. 115 (33.2%) of them were unemployed who have just completed their higher education. 65.1% of the respondents belong to the city, whereas 17.8% from the villages. 10.3 and 6.8% belongs to municipalities and panchayats respectively.

Out of all the participants, 265 (76.5%) of them responded that physiotherapy is a combination of exercise therapy, electrotherapy, as well as massage and relaxation therapies. 65 (18.7%) of them

consider physiotherapy deals only with exercises, whereas 16 (4.6%) think it's just massage therapy. 83.8% knows that the BPT and MPT graduates are called as physiotherapists, whereas 7.1% consider physiotherapists as MBBS graduates, and 9.1% consider physiotherapists as yoga trainers. 234 people knows that BPT is a four years course with six months internship whereas the rest think it's a course with less than three years duration.

89% of the respondents confirm that physiotherapy is an independent profession. 203 people strongly agree that physiotherapy plays a major role in medical field whereas 22 of them strongly disagree the same. When 52 of them just agrees the statement, 69 of them are neutral in their opinion. 62.3% responded that physiotherapist cannot prescribe medicines whereas 20.5% responded that they can, and the rest are doubtful. Out of the 346 respondents, 278 of them said that physiotherapist can prescribe exercises and can use electrotherapeutic equipments. They also confirm that physiotherapy treatment is scientifically proven.

268 of the 346 participants acknowledge that physiotherapist deals with patients in various medical fields such as musculoskeletal and orthopaedics, neurology, sports medicine, geriatric medicine, and obstetrics and gynaecology. 25 of them consider physiotherapy is concentrated to neurology whereas 53 of them consider it to be focussed on orthopaedics and sports. 234 of them consider that physiotherapy can be performed at home with advice from therapist and with guidance. 46 of them consider that physiotherapy can be performed at home only after prescription by a medical consultant whereas 66 of them responded that it can be performed by watching You tube videos. 10.2% of them doesn't consider the role of physiotherapy as a preventive measure to disease conditions, whereas 13.6% of them stands neutral. 76.2% of the respondents agree the role of physiotherapy as a preventive measure for illness and diseases.

Our survey attracted majority of youth between the ages of 20-30, then that of others. It was observed that more than 60% of the respondents are aware about the role of physiotherapy and the qualification required to be a physiotherapist. It was noteworthy that 20.5% of them think that physiotherapist can prescribe medication, whereas it is not legalised to do so in India. Those who responded this is a mixed group and even works in the healthcare field. We contemplate this response may have come out of personal experience or lack of awareness. We consider this question has

more weightage in identifying the awareness of physiotherapist among general public.

It has been identified that mass media serve as the main source in providing awareness to the general public in most of the situations [5]. In a study by Dissanayaka., *et al*, it was found that 63% out of 776 high school students were unaware of the profession and its application [6]. Rathod., *et al*. observed that 57% out of 79 primary school teachers are not aware of physiotherapy and the conditions being treated by a therapist [7]. We suggest that awareness programs regarding the profession and the benefits of exercises must initiate in the school levels, which also help in educating their families. Physiotherapy must be introduced in carrier guidance programs as a major field in medicine.

Understanding about the medical conditions and identifying the first point of contact and referral points is better with higher levels of literacy [8]. Lack of information regarding the profession in rural areas, poor communication among community health care workers, and poor referral practices found to be the hindering factors leading to lack of awareness in general public [9,10]. We suggest that the authorities and professional bodies must take the responsibility of bringing awareness among general public regarding the profession, the conditions managed by therapists, identifying fake courses and quack practitioners, etc.

## Conclusion

We identified a lack of awareness regarding the physiotherapy profession and the treatment strategies among general public. A need of regulatory body of physiotherapy is mandatory in regulating and licensing those who practice within the country so as to clinch and penalize those who malpractice. The use of social media platforms in raising awareness among public may be the best choice right now.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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