

An Evaluation of Research Priorities in Occupational Health Physiotherapy

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Background: A list of research priorities in occupational health (OH) physiotherapy was identified at a national OH Physiotherapy Conference in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2018. **Objective:** To update the current research priorities in OH physiotherapy by expert consensus at an OH physiotherapy virtual meeting in the UK. **Materials and Methods:** A nominal group technique was used as a consensus technique. Fifteen participants with relevant qualifications and experience in OH physiotherapy agreed to participate and were handed the original list of research priorities and asked to rank it in order of their current importance. The resultant scores gave an indication of the level of consensus within the expert group. Participants were also asked to suggest other research topics of important that were not previously identified. These new topics were not used in the ranking process. **Results:** Following the expert ranking process eight topics were identified as key priorities providing an indication of where research funding ought to be directed. The benefits of OH physiotherapy based on health outcomes and return of investment was identified as the most important research to be undertaken. **Conclusion:** This project confirms both current and new research priorities to highlight areas for investment and to grow the overall evidence base.

Keywords: Occupational Health, Physiotherapy, Priorities, Research, Evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

Research priorities are frequently established to address identified gaps and emerging opportunities [1]. Within physiotherapy practice prioritising research is an important issue because the profession requires a sound knowledge base to inform practice derived from high quality research [2]. The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Occupational Health and Ergonomics (ACPOHE) actively promotes research activity as part of its core strategy. It recognises the importance of regularly reviewing the evidence base for occupational health (OH) physiotherapy to ensure that research is focused on areas of the highest priority. In 2018, at the national OH Physiotherapy Conference in the United Kingdom (UK), 96 research topics were reported using a survey, which after de-duplication 76 remained and following content analysis 18 OH physiotherapy research priorities emerged [3]. It was envisaged that by identifying current research priorities in OH physiotherapy, this work will support the national OH research strategy, encourage and support research that focus on limitations in clinical practice and determine where research funding ought to be directed. The main research topics that emerged from the conference included the impact of health benefits and cost-

effectiveness of OH physiotherapy services and a need to determine the most effective OH physiotherapy service model [3]. These priorities were updated in 2021 following a ranking process in order to achieve consensus within an expert group of OH physiotherapists. This paper presents the updated results.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A nominal group technique was used as a consensus technique to provide a systematic process of collecting and aggregating informed judgements from a group of experts on a specific topic [4]. In order to identify expert OH physiotherapists, the ACPOHE database was searched for participants from the specialist registered membership area. This database is one of the largest national OH physiotherapy databases in the UK. OH physiotherapists represented included those from the academic, industry, National Health Service (NHS) and private practice sectors. Expert panel members were selected based on their relevant postgraduate training in OH and at least five years of work experience in the area of occupational health and ergonomic practice. Thirty-seven participants were identified and invited via email to a virtual expert group consensus meeting. Round 1 involved reading and ranking the original list of research priorities in order of their current importance. This round

incorporated four prioritisation consensus questions (Table 1). The resultant scores gave an indication of the level of consensus within the expert group [5]. Round 2 involved asking participants to suggest research topics of important that was not on the original list. These new topics were not used in the ranking process however they provided an indication of research priorities for the future. Ethical approval was not required because this work was classified as a service improvement exercise [6].

RESULTS

Fifteen participants responded to the email and agreed to participate which indicates a 41% response rate. The demographic data of the participants are

presented in Table 2. The original list consisted of 18 OH research topics [3]. Following the expert ranking process eight topics were identified as key priorities providing an indication of where research funding ought to be directed (Table 3). The top three research priorities were the benefits of OH physiotherapy based on health outcomes and return of investment, comparison of the different models and consultations of OH physiotherapy and measuring the impact of interventions and determining the most effect OH physiotherapeutic measures. Feedback from the group of expert participants at the end of the ranking process revealed five new research topics for the future (Table 4). Although these new topics are general and broad ranging, they have relevance and importance for OH physiotherapists.

Table 1: Prioritisation Criteria

“Does the topic address a significant need or gap in the evidence for occupational health physiotherapy practice and/or service delivery?”
“What is the potential impact of the research for quality of care and experience for clients, managers and commissioners?”
“What is the potential impact of the research for physiotherapy practice?”
“What is the relevance of the research to organisation/government policy and priorities?”

Table 2: Demographics

Variables	n	%
Number of participants	15	50
Grade of participant		
Basic grade physiotherapist	0	0
Specialist physiotherapist	9	60
Head of service	4	27
Academic	2	13
Other (please specify)	0	0
Service Sector		
Health and social care	4	27
Industry	6	40
Higher education	2	13
Private practice	3	20
Other (please specify)	0	0

Table 3: Rankings of Research Priorities

Priority	Topic
1	The benefits of occupational health physiotherapy based on health outcomes and return of investment
2	Comparison of different models of occupational health physiotherapy provisions: treatment vs case management vs combined treatment & case management
3	Occupational health physiotherapy consultations: face-to-face versus telephone consultations for long term conditions
4	Impact of ergonomic interventions: cost effectiveness and organisational benefits
5	Best outcome measures to evaluate effectiveness of occupational health physiotherapy interventions
6	Understanding how employees engage with occupational health physiotherapy services and the factors that affect their level of engagement.
7	Long term outcomes in managing musculoskeletal disorders: occupational health physiotherapists versus occupational health physicians and/or nurses.
8	Impact of occupational health physiotherapy on presenteeism

Table 4: List of future research priorities

Effectiveness of undergraduate physiotherapy training and exploration of postgraduate occupational health competencies
Further research into the occupational health physiotherapy consultant role
Managing issues related to recruitment and retention of occupational health physiotherapists
Identifying occupational health physiotherapy professional and service identity
Use of information technology to inform occupational health physiotherapy practice

DISCUSSION

This evaluation sought to explore key research priorities in OH physiotherapy by expert consensus using a nominal group technique. The policy and services of OH physiotherapy have been rapidly changing over the past decade and there was concern that the research agenda did not reflect these changes [7]. The need for OH physiotherapists to demonstrate the value of their interventions through the measurement of health changes and the associated cost-effectiveness was unsurprisingly the top research priority. In a time where funding is limited, OH physiotherapists are required to demonstrate that clients receiving physiotherapeutic interventions show health improvements and the service is provided at a reasonable cost. It remains a challenge to determine what OH physiotherapy model offers the best service value, for example treatment versus case management versus a combined treatment and case management approach. Further research in identifying the most effective OH physiotherapy model will support the OH physiotherapy business case.

The need to engage with external stakeholders was also a priority for OH physiotherapists. There are some studies that explored the role of OH physiotherapists amongst different stakeholders, such as workforce managers, clinicians and clients [8-10]. However, engagement with other important stakeholders warrants further research. Such stakeholders should include general practitioners, senior executive management, risk and safety advisors, public health consultants, solicitors and trade unions. The suggestions of further research into effectiveness of undergraduate training and consultant roles advocates for the development and career progression of OH physiotherapists. Research into recruitment and retention of OH physiotherapists were suggestive of the difficulty in hiring and keeping OH physiotherapy staff. As OH physiotherapists develop new role components and service structures, undertaking further research on new professional and service identities and embracing technology becomes apparent.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation, which involved ranking the previous OH physiotherapy research priority list in order to achieve consensus within an expert group of OH physiotherapists, was designed to identify the areas of physiotherapy practice and service delivery most requiring evidence and to ascertain where research

funding ought to be directed. This updated list also provided topics of new research priorities, which can be used to inform future research projects amongst OH physiotherapists. The expert ranking process and future research directives emphasises the expectation that OH physiotherapists must be proactive researchers and not passive recipients of research in order to advance the profession.

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