Physiotherapy post-acute rehabilitation plan. What are the contributing factors influencing referral to massage therapists?

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Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore physiotherapists’ perceptions of massage therapy, gain insight into what stage physiotherapists refer their patients to massage therapists as part of the post acute rehabilitation plan, and to identify referral patterns between physiotherapists and massage therapists.

The researcher examined whether the perceptions of physiotherapists were enhancing or inhibiting referral rates onto massage therapists, and at what stage did physiotherapists consider the most effective for the practice of massage therapy in the post acute rehabilitation phase.

Literature

Massage therapy is perceived and valued as a personalised, holistic and hands on approach to health management.1 “Massage therapy is increasingly offered to hospitalised patients for various conditions to assist with the management of common symptoms such as pain, anxiety, and tension.”2 General Practitioners (GPs) who refer their patients for massage therapy has been met with little resistance.3

Guidelines for the use in physiotherapy.” P

Further benefits were the continued observation and over-sewing of the client’s rehabilitation plan … “that way we know that patient is actually booking in and is coming to their appointments, so I think it’s easier for keeping that on flow of treatment.” P

Physiotherapists Perceptions of Massage Therapists

Two themes were identified when exploring participants’ perceptions of massage therapists: massage therapy was ‘valuable’ and there was ‘variability’ in massage therapy practise. Analysis developed three themes when looking at factors influencing the effective referral from physiotherapists to massage therapists; these included: ‘ease of access’, an ‘effective network system’ and the ‘stage of rehabilitation and physiotherapy plan’.

Results

- Ease of Access
- Effective Network System
- Stage of Rehabilitation and Physiotherapy Plan

Factors Influencing the Referral between physiotherapists and massage therapists.

Participants considered massage therapy to be “...hands-on treatment to relax and release muscles, it’s something that we use in physiotherapy.” P... “...deep tissue or relaxation massage, therapy as a treatment.” P... “...hands-on loosening up muscles, desensitising structures” P... “soft tissue re-education, working on the muscle.” P variability is captured the ideas that massage therapy has a variety of treatment approaches, variable levels of education, training and associated skills ... “qualification of course, see how they practise and if it’s good or not” P... “someone qualified, someone who has a degree or diploma, having studied for a few years and be confident with treating therapeutic and sports massage” P

Participants past experiences shaped their views on the quality of care that massage therapists provide, which had a direct link on their perceptions of what a massage therapist could achieve with regards to musculoskeletal treatment ... “based on past experience, if they’ve gone and done that further study they’re obviously quite a sharp and driven individual and they’re definitely in the know about what they’re doing.” P... “there’s so many out there who may have done a six-week course or not have studied much, I think it brings down the standard a little bit and physios are probably not aware of how much quality of care they could provide.” P... “it’s a really good relationship with physios, I’ve seen some patients who have had amazing care from a massage therapist and accurate delivery of treatment.” P

“Ease of access” provided insight into what stage referral was occurring in the rehabilitation process and what criteria participants considered when choosing to include a massage therapist in their physiotherapy plan ... “understanding what that person’s injury is, but also what they want out of treatment, it’s an individual.” P... “everyone’s a little bit different, I have a plan which is relatively standardised but it needs to be modified for most patients.” P

Design

A qualitative approach was utilised, employing a semi-structured interview method. Twenty minute interviews were undertaken in August/September 2017 and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Ethical approval was granted by the Southern Institute of Technology Human Ethics Committee.

Participants

There were five female physiotherapists from three different physiotherapy clinics in the Southland region. The participants had been practising for an average of eight years and were Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) registered, and currently working in private practice.

Procedure

All interviews were carried out by the primary researcher, an under-graduate Bachelor of Therapeutic and Sports Massage student. Participants were sought using the researchers own networks. Prior to the interviews taking place, each participant was sent an information sheet, consent form and interview guide. The interviews were conducted at each participants physiotherapy clinic.

Data Analysis

Analysis was carried out using a thematic approach. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, categories were identified, and themes were generated that best represented the data. Participant anonymity and confidentiality was maintained and results are reported using codes for each participant.

Limitations

The limitations of this study is the small sample size and findings cannot be generalised to all physiotherapists in New Zealand.

Discussion

This research has provided insight into the perceptions that physiotherapists have regarding massage therapy, at what stage physiotherapists refer their patients to a massage therapist within their rehabilitation plan and whether there are any factors influencing referrals. All participants considered massage therapy to be an effective form of treatment. Participants reasoned that massage therapists should ideally hold a high level of education and be up to date with current musculoskeletal and soft tissue treatment techniques. The growing number of educated massage therapists could have the potential to add credibility to the massage industry.2 Participants stated, clients were referred to massage therapists near the end of rehabilitation process, though this was decided on a case-by-case basis. This resulted in a positive rehabilitation experience for their clients, helped physiotherapists off-load some of their client load, and offered a second clinical opinion or confirmation of diagnosis. Communication was often mentioned as the cornerstone of developing clear and concise referral processes which added to the ease of the referral and hand-over of clients between both professions.

Future research: strategies that will enhance the engagement between physiotherapists and massage therapists could be realised if these two health providers are working in conjunction and are made easily available to consumers.

Conclusions

- Physiotherapists recognise the significant benefits that massage therapy applied by massage therapists can achieve.
- Education, training and experience were identified as qualities massage therapists should attain to be considered a viable option for referral.
- Transparent communication skills were acknowledged as being optimal for the efficient of the professional relationship that has been developed between physiotherapists and massage therapists.
- "getting a really good relationship with physios would hugely help" P... “it’s important to know them and to know how they practise as well” P... “I think that personal experience helps us to understand” P... “educating groups of physio about what massage therapists could provide.” P

References

