

## Awareness and Perception of the Roles and Services of Physiotherapy among Private Healthcare Practitioners in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

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### Abstract

**Background:** Physiotherapy helps restore movement and function when a person is affected by injury, illness, or disability. Due to its non-invasive and cost-effective techniques, Physiotherapy is rapidly gaining popularity among the people however the awareness of Physiotherapy among various health care practitioners is questionable. This study aims to study the current level of awareness and perception of Physiotherapy roles and services among health care practitioners in the private sector working at Kota Kinabalu.

**Methods:** A quantitative, cross-sectional study was adopted with a total of 120 participants with an age range between 20 to 60 years old who were recruited using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A self-developed questionnaire on awareness and perception of the roles of Physiotherapy was distributed to the participants.

**Results:** The data collected revealed all 120 participants have a moderate level of awareness although 64.2 % of participants did not receive any Physiotherapy treatment before. Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy (86.70%), Sports Physiotherapy (86.70%), rehabilitation, and pain management (70%) were the ones that have received the highest awareness. Not only that, but 78.13% of participants also reported having no negative perception of Physiotherapy.

**Conclusions:** There is moderate awareness regarding the level of awareness and positive perception towards the roles and services of Physiotherapy among health care practitioners in the private sector at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. These indicated that health care practitioners are open to Physiotherapy practices and they are very likely to refer patients to a Physiotherapist when necessary.

### Keywords

Awareness; perception; Physiotherapy; health care practitioners.

### Introduction

Physiotherapists are healthcare professionals who maintain, restore, and improve movement, activity, and health for individuals of all age groups. In some continents, they are addressed as Physical therapists and in other continents as Physiotherapists. Health promotion, prevention, and treatment of diseases to



ensure optimal functioning and better quality of life of individuals are the focus of Physiotherapy (Rea et al. 2004; ISCO 2008).

According to the American Physical Therapy Association, the roles of a physical therapist is to diagnose and treat individuals of all ages who have medical problems or other health-related conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. Physical therapists will examine each individual and develop a plan using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. Both the American Physical Therapy Association and World Confederation for Physical Therapy have the same view regarding the definition of physical therapy, the roles of a physical therapist, and what they are qualified to undertake (APTA, 2019).

After the world war, there was an emerging need for rehabilitation specialists, which evolved the roles of Physiotherapists to be the need of the hour. And over the years, Physiotherapists have evolved as autonomous healthcare practitioners. Many developed countries have direct access to Physiotherapists. However, in the underdeveloped and some developing countries, this is a hurdle to be overridden to autonomy. One probable reason may be a lack of awareness among the population and other healthcare team members on the scope of this profession (Dean 2009). Another reason being the poor perception that the profession is all about massage and exercise (Rognlie and Searls 2011).

The Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA) conducted a study on the Manpower Requirements in the Healthcare Sub-sector and identified that there is a critical talent gap for professions such as Physiotherapists which proves that this profession is in high demand (ILMIA 2020).

The scope of physical therapy practice is not only limited to direct patient care but also includes aspects like public health strategies, advocating for health, supervising and delegating to others, leading, managing, teaching, conducting research, developing and implementing health policies at the local, national and international levels.

Hence, creating awareness of the population including the other healthcare professionals has become one of the challenges of the Physiotherapist (Jackson 2004). Thus a good awareness of the roles of Physiotherapy can be the best antidote to the soaring misconceptions about the profession itself. (Achterbergh and Vriens 2002). The scope of Physiotherapy in the tertiary healthcare level in managing and rehabilitating disorders amongst the differently-abled population is recognized. However, the roles of Physiotherapy in health promotion and prevention is still a part of the hidden iceberg (Paul and Mullerpatan 2015).

According to the Cambridge English dictionary, “awareness” is defined as the knowledge that something exists or understanding of a situation or subject at present based on information or experience. The awareness of Physiotherapy among various healthcare practitioners is questionable. As Physiotherapists practice independently of other healthcare services and within interdisciplinary rehabilitation programs, they often depend on referrals from other practitioners from different fields of healthcare. Therefore, the growth and development of Physiotherapy as a branch of healthcare and career depends on the awareness of the referring physicians and their acceptance of Physiotherapy (Agni and Battin 2017). In conclusion, it is important to assess the awareness of Physiotherapy among healthcare practitioners so that Physiotherapy could be better utilized to improve patient’s quality of life.

## Methodology

A cross-sectional study design was adopted using a convenience sampling method. A total of 120 participants were recruited in this study. The inclusion criteria are those who are healthcare practitioners with working experience of a minimum of one (1) year in the healthcare field. Whereas, admin personnel working in a healthcare field with no direct contact or influence in the management of patient treatment and Physiotherapists or Physiotherapy students will be excluded in this study.

All participants were explained the study purpose, written informed consent was obtained and answered a self-developed questionnaire which consists of 13 items concerning the awareness and perception of the roles and services of Physiotherapy. This questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts. This study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of INTI International University. Data were analyzed by using statistical software package SPSS (Version 22.0). Data on demographic information, awareness and perception were analyzed using frequency distribution table.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 132 participants were initially screened with twelve participants were excluded after failing to meet the inclusion criteria, hence 120 participants were selected for final analysis. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants were summarized as in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Participants (n =120) n (%)</b>
<b>Age (in years)</b>	
20 - 29	42 (35%)
30 - 39	35 (29.2%)
40 - 49	25 (20.8%)
50 - 59	17 (14.2%)
60 and above	1 (0.8%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	45 (37.5%)
Female	75 (62.5%)
<b>Employment Duration (in years)</b>	
1-5	46 (38.3%)
6-10	24 (20%)
11-20	21 (17.5%)
More than 20 years	29 (24.2%)

This study was done to assess the level of awareness and perception of the roles and services of Physiotherapy among healthcare practitioners in the private sector in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. A total of 120 healthcare practitioners participated in this cross-sectional study.

According to the analysis of the obtained data, it was observed that all 120 participants have a moderate awareness and a positive perception regarding the roles and services of Physiotherapy. Our study results were further strengthened by previous studies

done in Nigeria reporting a fair number of people aware of Physiotherapy and its functions (Maruf et al. 2012). On the contrary, a study done in Australia has demonstrated a significantly large number of participants (96%) on awareness of Physiotherapy (Sheppard 1995). The variation on the level of awareness across the country could be as a result of the nature of Physiotherapy practice. Physiotherapy as the first contact is common in Australia but not in some other countries (Struber 2003). This nature of practice may restrict public knowledge.

Table 2. Awareness and perception of the roles and services of Physiotherapy.

Variables	Participants (n =120) Percentage (%)
<b>Receival of Physiotherapy management</b>	
Yes	35.8
No	64.2
<b>Source of Physiotherapy knowledge</b>	
During tertiary education	55.0
Hospital or medical center	77.5
Family member or friend	41.7
Colleagues	39.2
Mass media	28.3
Word of mouth	25.8
<b>Confidence of knowledge</b>	
High	28.0
Moderate	23.0
Low	49.0
<b>Perception of Physiotherapy</b>	
Skeptical of Physiotherapy	10.8
Bad experience	0.8
No negative percption	78.1
Only complimentary	8.3
Unfavorable interactions	1.7
Others	0.0
<b>Importance of Physiotherapy</b>	
Very important	40.8
Important	58.3
Not important	0.0

### ***Receival of Physiotherapy management***

Through the data obtained, it can be observed that out of 120 participants, 64.2% of them have not received any Physiotherapy treatment before. Since they have not been exposed to any Physiotherapy management, they may not be aware of what is Physiotherapy about, and the types of treatments associated with it. When there is no need for them to be in contact with Physiotherapy, they may not

actively seek any knowledge regarding it and hence may have a low awareness regarding Physiotherapy roles and services.

A high percentage of participants, 62.5%, reported that they knew Physiotherapy is being offered as both a degree program and a diploma program. This may be because various institutions across Malaysia have publicized the Physiotherapy program they offer and hence have indirectly raised awareness regarding the educational levels of Physiotherapy in Malaysia.

### ***Source of Physiotherapy knowledge***

It is noteworthy that 77.5% of participants got to know of the Physiotherapy field from hospitals and medical centers. This may be because almost all hospitals and medical centers offer Physiotherapy services, and while they worked in a hospital or medical center setting, they got to know of Physiotherapy from these places. Also, 55% of participants reported that they knew about Physiotherapy during their tertiary education. This could be that the institution they studied at is offering a Physiotherapy program and they are aware of it. Following this, participants reported having heard about Physiotherapy from family members and friends, and colleagues at a relatively low percentage. However, the lowest percentage reported is 28.3% for mass media and 25.8% by word of mouth. Popular media and job pamphlets have been identified to be a significant source of information about Physiotherapists in Japan (Webster et al. 2008). Hence, it is important to publicize and educate the public about the benefits, roles, and services provided by a Physiotherapist through mass media as it can reach a wide range of audiences easily and raise awareness about it.

### ***Confidence of knowledge***

23% of participants reported being moderately confident in their knowledge about Physiotherapy while most of the other participants reported having a lower confidence level. This question relates more to how the participants perceive their confidence in their knowledge regarding the roles and services of a Physiotherapist. The perception level may be different than the level of awareness they possess regarding the knowledge they have of Physiotherapy since the perception level and awareness level is not always equal. Sometimes, an individual may perceive that they know a lot more than they do, and vice versa. Educational level has been a significant predictor determining the knowledge and scope of Physiotherapy. Higher levels of literacy are associated with better understanding and knowledge about medical conditions and healthcare (Odebiyi et al. 2010).

### ***Perception of Physiotherapy***

From the data obtained regarding the negative perception of Physiotherapy, a favorable 78.13% of participants reported having no negative perception of Physiotherapy. This is a good sign as it shows that healthcare practitioners are generally open to the idea and practices of Physiotherapy in the healthcare sector. A higher level of awareness can be achieved, and better utilization of Physiotherapy services can be put to use when healthcare practitioners are open to learning about the benefits that Physiotherapy can provide (Al-Eisa et al. 2016).

Only a small percentage of participants (10.80%) reported being skeptical of Physiotherapy as they do not know much about it and 8.30% reported that Physiotherapy is complementary to medicine and therefore is not very important. These misconceptions can be changed with the right information and

awareness. Therefore, Physiotherapists must raise awareness about this field and what it can contribute to the healthcare sector. It is important to emphasize evidence-based practice in Physiotherapy to prove that it is a branch of healthcare that has a concrete scientific basis. As compared with a study done by Al-Eisa et al (2016), they reported that 58% of their subjects reported a negative perception about Physiotherapy. Which is different as compared to the data we obtained. The difference could be contributed to a difference in culture and healthcare practices in Saudi Arabia.

### ***Importance of Physiotherapy***

About 40.80% of participants believe that Physiotherapy plays a very important roles in the healthcare sector and 58.30% of participants believe that Physiotherapy is important. This result indicated that healthcare practitioners here in Kota Kinabalu are open to the practices of Physiotherapy if it could benefit their patients. It is also consistent with the data obtained.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that there is moderate awareness and positive perception towards the roles and services of Physiotherapy among healthcare practitioners. Data obtained showed a positive sign that even though there is only moderate awareness about Physiotherapy which indicates that these healthcare practitioners are open to Physiotherapy practices and they are very likely to refer patients to a Physiotherapist when necessary. Raising awareness is important to further elevate the Physiotherapy profession, improve the rate of referrals from healthcare practitioners, bridge any gap that exists in the healthcare system, and improve patient management.

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