Navigating the Grey Zone of Physiotherapy Assistant Autonomy in Homecare: Perspectives of Physiotherapists and Physiotherapy Assistants

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Background

• Aging population with increasing comorbidities in Canada, but limited funding and shortage of physiotherapists (PTs)
• Shift to community-based services and use of physiotherapy assistants (PTAs) for cost-effectiveness and increased access to care
• 2013: Ontario government incentivized PTAs in homecare³
• College of Physiotherapists of Ontario (CPO) guidelines⁵: PTs responsible for all care provided by PTAs, PTAs cannot assess or change the treatment plan
• Literature from USA shows a lack of clarity on the PTA role, including an uncertainty around what tasks PTAs can perform¹²
• Studies from the UK and USA cite trust as a key feature in the PT/PTA working relationship⁴:⁵
• No Canadian literature on the use of PTAs in homecare

Challenges identified in literature may be amplified as PTs/PTAs working relationship in homecare rehabilitation teams?

Methods

• Qualitative descriptive study design
• Approved by the University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Board
• PTs and PTAs working in 3 Ontario Local Integrated Health Networks (LIHNs) recruited via email through the homecare agency
• 10 PTs + 5 PTAs interviewed via phone/Skype by 3 researchers
• Interviews were transcribed and quality checked

DEPICT model used for data analysis⁶:

• Dynamic reading
• Engaged code development
• Participatory coding
• Inclusive reviewing and summarizing of categories
• Collaborative analyzing
• Translating

Researchers reviewed 3 transcripts each to identify themes in data

Recurrent themes used to develop a codebook of 6 coding categories

Each transcript coded by 2 researchers using the codebook

Summaries developed for each code category

Team discussed summaries to identify relationships between themes

Knowledge and data from this study were submitted to Physiotherapy Canada

Key Finding: The appropriate amount of PTA autonomy falls on a continuum. At one end, PTAs follow prescribed treatment plan exactly; at the other end, PTAs have the ability to change the treatment plan. Four key factors determine where along this continuum is appropriate in a specific situation.

“’The fact that they’re working under me, I have to have some trust with their ability to do their job, that’s why it’s important to work with someone that you feel you have a good communication and has the same kind of work ethic that you’re expecting.”

“On the system level, I think the LIHNs are very unrealistic with what they’re giving us. I think they really have to understand the College guidelines. It’s hard to keep up with the clients when you’re in there three months and you’ve basically your two visits after your assessment and your joint visit.”

“’If I know the PTA, and I know that they know what they’re talking about, then I’ll just let them progress an exercise by themselves.”

“’There are multiple comorbidities that these patients have that are complex, and most of the time there is a safety issue in terms of falls risk. I see this as a challenge because a physiotherapist assistant is not as skilled as a physiotherapist.”

What are the perspectives of PTs and PTAs providing homecare services in Ontario regarding their experiences since the introduction of PTAs into homecare rehabilitation teams?

Results

Complexity of Client

Appropriate level of PTA autonomy?

System Influences

Perceived PTA Competency

PT/PTA Relationship

Perceived PTA Competency

Discussion

Implications for Practice

• PTAs benefit clients: increased access to physiotherapy care and play a key role in building patient confidence
• PT’s noted their role has shifted to include more managerial tasks

Mitigating Supervision and Delegation Challenges

• PTs and PTAs should discuss expectations
  • what, when and how to communicate in homecare
  • PT As autonomy to modify the treatment plan for specific patients
• Homecare agencies should create opportunities for
  • PTs and PTAs to get to know each other
  • PTs to train PTAs to perform specific skills
• LIHNs should allow PTs freedom to decide which cases are appropriate for PTAs
• College of Physiotherapists of Ontario could consider:
  • clarifying guidelines re: what is meant by assessment
  • regulating PTAs in Ontario

References


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