

Why Do Physiotherapists Not Know What Physiotherapy Is?

Working as physiotherapist in both professional sport and private practice it amazes me that many of those we see don't actually know what physiotherapy is. This is particularly so for private patients who sometimes have no real idea of what we do as a profession and what we might be able to do to help them out, whatever their problem.

Is this a surprise?

Well probably not given that physiotherapists themselves have differing opinions and thoughts about the definition and purpose of physiotherapy. As a test of this I myself wrote a one sentence definition of physiotherapy whilst also asking several of my colleagues to do the same. Here's the results.....

Physiotherapy is.....

' Diagnosis, treatment and management of a problem, with progressive restoration of function to the desired level '

' Identification of injury and management of pain, with follow up restoration of movement, strength and athletic tasks '

' The maintenance of a healthy functional body equipped to perform '

' Restoring and optimising movement and pain perception through active rehabilitation, applications of pain science and patient education to promote independence '

As you can see yourself these definitions differ. This is interesting as these definitions are from 'physiotherapists,' who trained under the same system and curriculum and are all currently working within the same setting (professional sport). The mention of terms such as 'function' 'pain' 'restoration' and 'injury' or terms similar to these are replicated throughout the definitions listed above. This implies similarities in the way we view physiotherapy. However, as I read each and every definition, I read physiotherapy to be something different in each example. Not that I disagree with any of the above definitions, complete the opposite. Each has a different spin on what is a very varied and multi-factorial profession. But if we differ as professionals as to what physiotherapy is, how can we expect our patients to make sense of this and decide whether physiotherapy might be for them.

These definitions again differ from what the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, the body all Chartered Physiotherapists are registered with, define physiotherapy as;

' Physiotherapy helps restore movement and function when someone is affected by injury, illness or disability'

Does This Really Matter?

In short, I don't think it matters if physiotherapists differ in what we think our profession is and what the service of physiotherapy offers our patients. Physiotherapists will differ greatly in the ways and means they diagnosis, treat, rehabilitate and manage similar presentations. Is one method better than another? Probably not, assuming they both get to the same end point in the same time period. I actually think autonomy and the ability for us to be different to one another, to develop our own approach is one of the things that makes working in this profession so good.

However, I do think it is a massive problem that those we see daily, our patients, don't know what we are and the services we can offer. I'm not suggesting we need a standardised definition of what physiotherapy from a central body that we must all use and acknowledge. Given the differences in approaches discussed above I think this would be both unsuitable and undesirable.

But there is an issue in that many of our 'potential patients' don't access our services largely because they are unclear about what it is we actually can provide them.

Should we be surprised then why someone in pain wouldn't seek our assistance in the aim of becoming pain-free and improving function? We question why these people choose massage therapy, osteopathy, chiropractic care or other remedial therapies over physiotherapy.

The reason they are doing this is not because they perceive these therapies better than physiotherapy.

I honestly believe its because they don't know what physiotherapy is.

In turn, they cannot make an informed judgement as to how physiotherapy will be beneficial to them.

Less uncertainty surrounds the other professions listed above. Everyone has a grasp of what a massage therapy session would entail or that they would go and visit a chiropractor should they have neck or back pain and wanted it manipulating.

As physiotherapists we are missing the boat.

We need to be better salespersons as to what we offer and how we can help our patients. The beauty of our professions is that we all so different in the way we approach physiotherapy. But this might also be our biggest flaw, as we don't deliver this information well, particularly to 'potential patients.'

Maybe we need to explain better what physiotherapy is.....

Maybe we just need to be more transparent as to the services we offer.....

Maybe we just need to educate our patients better.....

Thanks for reading

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