The Value of Physiotherapy to Primary Health Care in Saskatchewan

The Value of Physiotherapy

Primary health care (PHC) refers to an approach to health care that includes all services that play a part in health, such as income, housing, education and environment [1]. Primary care is the first point of contact with the health care system and is an element within PHC that focuses on health care services, including health promotion, illness and injury prevention, and the diagnosis and treatment of illness and injury [1]. PHC models are effective strategies to improve patient access to needed care while at the same time improving efficiency, coordination, and continuity to ensure health needs are met in the right place at the right time by the most appropriate health care provider(s) [1].

Physiotherapists are well positioned to take on an increased role in PHC models in Saskatchewan.

Role of Physiotherapy in Primary Health Care

Physiotherapists are autonomous, self-regulated health professionals whose practice includes health promotion and disease prevention, both to individuals and in the community. They are uniquely qualified to assess, improve and maintain the individual's functional independence and physical performance and to prevent or manage pain, physical impairments, disabilities and limits to participation in life activities.

There have been positive outcomes for patients, providers and health systems when physiotherapy is included in primary care settings. Physiotherapists practicing in inter-professional collaborative teams help ensure continuity of care for patients and their families across the lifespan and care continuum. Within a collaborative inter-professional PHC team, physiotherapists would support strategies for health promotion and disease prevention, as well as identify and treat a variety of health conditions [2].
Physiotherapists are an important resource to other PHC providers such as physicians and nurse practitioners, especially in the prevention and management of chronic and episodic disease.

Impact on Patient Experience

A recent study conducted in Saskatchewan that evaluated satisfaction in patients referred to a spinal triage service, and their referring care providers, found that reduced access to physiotherapy services due to rural residence, costs and wait times were perceived as barriers to effective care [3].

Establishing physiotherapy within primary care has resulted in high levels of satisfaction among patients and primary care physicians, and improved patient-related outcomes such as quality of life, activity tolerance and health status [4, 5].

Early access to physiotherapy in the emergency department has resulted in shorter hospital stays, decreased wait times to begin active treatment, and consistently equivalent or higher levels of patient satisfaction [6-11].

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Impact on Population Health

Many of the health issues Saskatchewan faces are driven by demographic trends such as: the high population growth rates, an aging population, and the high proportion of the population who live in rural and remote regions. Physiotherapy is an important component of care in the management of chronic conditions such as arthritis, chronic low back pain, and pulmonary disease that are prevalent in those populations[4, 5, 12, 13]. Policy experts report that collaborative practice models that include rehabilitation professionals, such as physiotherapists, will enable the best client/patient health outcomes[14, 15].

Both patients and primary care physicians[4, 5], have indicated high levels of satisfaction with physiotherapy services delivered in primary care settings. Additional benefits include improvements in patient-related outcomes such as quality of life, activity tolerance and health status[4, 5].

Impact on health care costs

Physiotherapists practicing in primary care settings have delivered care that is cost effective when compared to hospital-based services[16, 17], and has decreased both waiting times for services [16-18]and referral rates to specialists[19]. Physiotherapy services provided in emergency departments has been demonstrated to result in shorter hospital stays [6-11]

Summary

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Health's Health Care System Framework indicates: *"A strong primary health care system provides access to high quality care delivered by a team of health professionals that meets the needs of patients and their families of all ages, in any health care setting"* [20].

Physiotherapists deliver effective and efficient care and can support high quality PHC through a variety of roles. Examples include:

- Physiotherapy delivered in primary care settings such as community health centers, emergency departments and family physician offices;
- Physiotherapy as a resource for primary care physicians and/or nurse practitioners;
- Physiotherapists as first-contact health care providers; and
- Advanced practice physiotherapist roles[21].

The value of a health care service is more than its proven cost-effectiveness. Quality of life, access and continuity of care and integration of services are equally important criteria when looking at the broader aspect of value.

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