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Clinicians as Researchers

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This issue of PhJPT includes research on the development of an outcome measure intended to holistically assess pain. This is the first quantitative study published in PhJPT by a physical therapist primarily working in the clinics, developed from research questions from the clinical environment, and based on clinical experience. This paper also has an Invited Commentary from an expert on the topic, and a corresponding response to the commentary by the study author. The PhJPT intends also to create a podcast based on this paper and we encourage the readership to watch/listen to the podcast when it becomes available.

Physical therapy clinicians are in a unique position to advance the profession because of their direct involvement in patient care. They are well-positioned to identify research questions based on their everyday experiences and real-world challenges while providing care to patients and clients. Research projects that are triggered by needs and questions coming from the field or actual practice will yield findings that are more relevant and more contextualized.

Perceived barriers to the generation of or participation in clinical research by clinicians include lack of time, excess paperwork, need to obtain ethics approval (which could be time-consuming and complicated), lack of knowledge about research methods, or lack of awareness of ongoing research studies (Aljadi et al., 2013). These challenges are applicable within our collective practice. These barriers make it particularly impossible for clinicians to conduct full-scale quantitative or qualitative clinical research. The PhJPT Editorial team believes that clinicians could still participate in the generation of new knowledge from scientific investigations. This Editor's Note enumerates several specific ideas on how Filipino physical therapy clinicians could be more involved in the generation of research.

First, one of the most significant contributions clinicians can make to research is sharing their wealth of clinical expertise and insights. Having worked directly with patients, clinicians possess an intimate understanding of the challenges and needs within real-world healthcare settings. By sharing their experiences, clinicians can help identify research gaps and formulate relevant research questions that address the issues they encounter daily. It is important to share these experiences with other physical therapists, and other members of the interprofessional team. Through these discussions, physical therapists may realize that they share the same practice-specific concerns and questions with other physical therapy clinicians which may lead to initiatives to further investigate the issues or problems. In addition, interprofessional discourse may bring about common practice issues that affect all healthcare disciplines that could address the intricate challenges associated with topics such as health equity, social determinants of health, or patient safety.

Collaborations also result in the effective use of time and resources and potentially make scholarly endeavors less daunting, resulting to greater productivity (Leen & Bozeman, 2005).

Collaboration between clinicians and academic researchers is also a powerful mechanism for advancing research (Stern, 2005; Castonguay, & Muran, 2015). Clinicians bring their clinical acumen to the table, while researchers offer guidance on research methodologies, data analysis, and scholarly writing. This partnership results in studies that are not only scientifically rigorous but also clinically relevant. Planting seeds to develop collaborations between an invested clinician and researcher (usually academicians) could lead to an abundance of research projects.

Conducting literature reviews to identify and synthesize existing research relevant to their clinical practice is another way clinicians can contribute to evidence-informed practice. This process can lead to the development of clinical practice guidelines and recommendations that inform clinical decision-making. These publications could be realized through scoping reviews, which are relatively simple and easy to perform, to systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which require more complex protocols and analysis of data. Ethics reviews are not required for these types of publications. At present, several publications (Feldstein, 2005; Crowther, 2013) and online trainings (e.g., Cochrane Interactive training: <https://training.cochrane.org/interactivelearning>) are available specifically for clinicians to create such reviews.

Next, documenting and sharing interesting clinical observations and case analyses is another valuable contribution clinicians can make to the research literature. These real-life scenarios provide quantitative and qualitative data that enrich research efforts, particularly in areas where objective and measurable data may be limited. Clinical observations could be further organized and developed by writing a critically appraised paper. Critically appraised papers are helpful for evidence-based decision-making and do not need ethics approval (Foster et al., 2001). There are also several journals that accept critically appraised papers for publication such as the Journal of Physiotherapy, among others.

Documentation of a patient/client encounter through a Case Study or Case Report is another avenue for the clinician-researcher. This is especially valuable for situations where the clinician has encountered unique diagnoses or patient presentations and would like to share to the readership the resulting decisions surrounding interventions and outcomes. Case Reports and Case Studies could be performed retrospectively via review of de-identified patient/client documentation so there is no manipulation of any variables or outcomes. However, facilities may have different policies regarding the need for ethics review for such endeavors, so the clinician is advised to check with their corresponding institutions regarding the need for ethics review. In addition to descriptions of unique diagnoses and interventions, Case Reports could be written on comparing outcome measures, comparing and contrasting prognostic factors, analyzing legal or ethical issues and evaluating the effectiveness of quality improvement initiatives.

Also, clinicians can actively participate in clinical trials and research studies as site coordinators or collaborators. Their involvement ensures the successful execution of research protocols in clinical settings, contributing to the validity and generalizability of research findings. Clinicians can also participate in the Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro) training program (<https://training.pedro.org.au/d>) to improve their skills in evaluating the quality of research publications in physical therapy.

Experienced clinicians can mentor and educate students and junior clinicians on the importance of research and evidence-based practice. They play a crucial role in guiding aspiring researchers, fostering a culture of inquiry, and developing the next generation of scholars. Clinicians can also engage in advocacy efforts to promote research funding and policies that support evidence-based practice. Their firsthand experiences can illustrate the profound impact of research on patient care and outcomes, driving policy changes that benefit the profession.

In the coming new year, PhJPT aims to provide programming specific to clinicians to improve their capacity and capability to contribute to research. The readership is encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities for personal and professional growth and to help advance physical therapy practice.

In summary, clinicians are well-positioned to be active contributors in bridging the gap between research and clinical practice. By leveraging their clinical expertise, engaging in research endeavors, and disseminating knowledge, clinicians play an indispensable role in advancing the field of physical therapy. Through their contributions, they not only elevate the profession but also enhance the quality of care provided to patients, ultimately improving health outcomes. As we move forward, it is clear that clinicians will continue to be at the forefront of driving evidence-based practice and innovative research in physical therapy.

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