The role of physiotherapy in prevention and management of lifestyle-related conditions

Lifestyle-related conditions such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and cancer have caused a tremendous global disease burden worldwide [1]. The global burden can be quantified using the disability adjusted life years (DALYs) lost [2], which is an index that integrates the years of life lost due to a specific condition and the disability among those who survive. In Europe, for example, the total DALYs lost due to ischemic heart disease and lung cancer stands at 15.7 million and 3.2 million, respectively [2]. In Hong Kong, the crude incidence of cancer has also increased from 310.7 per 100,000 people in 1999 to 372.5 per 100,000 people in 2009 [3]. With the rapidly aging population, these figures can only be projected to rise. The outlook will even be gloomier if people continue to engage in unhealthy lifestyle behaviours.

The rise in lifestyle-related conditions also indicates a paradigm shift in health care service delivery, with increasing emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion (i.e., primary health care). Physiotherapists with expert knowledge in physical activity and exercise can play a critical role in reducing the risk of chronic lifestyle-related conditions by implementing client-centered health education strategies, especially those related to physical activity and weight control.

In this issue of the Hong Kong Physiotherapy Journal, Professor Elizabeth Dean and her team examined important issues related to unhealthy lifestyle behaviours and related conditions in two systematic reviews. In the first review [4], the number of relevant journal papers that focused on the lifestyle behaviours published between 1986 and 1989 and 2006 and 2009 were compared. The change in publication trends would provide us with some insight into how much the physical therapy community was sensitised to the concept of health promotion. In the second review [5], educational strategies used by physiotherapists to prevent and manage lifestyle-related conditions were examined. Although a number of different educational strategies were identified, the authors also highlighted the need to identify what educational strategies are the most optimal for different client groups.

In summary, lifestyle-related conditions have become a major health concern in the 21st century. As health professionals committed to providing the best care, physiotherapists can make tremendous contributions to the society if strategies to induce lifestyle behaviour change are incorporated into the overall clinical management of their clients.

References


Marco Y.C. Pang, PhD
Associate Professor, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

E-mail address: Marco.Pang@inet.polyu.edu.hk