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EDITORIAL

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Editorial

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The publication of the first issue of the new *Journal of Physiotherapy in Mental Health* marks a significant milestone in the field of physiotherapy within mental health. It also reflects the growing recognition and importance of this domain within physiotherapy. This development can be traced back to the initial conference held in Leuven, Belgium in 2006, where the idea of bringing together physiotherapists working in mental health care and psychiatry was first discussed. Subsequently, the *International Organization of Physiotherapy in Mental Health* (IOPTMH) was established and in 2011 recognized as a subgroup by the *World Physiotherapy*. In 2018, another important event, the 1st International Congress in Psychiatry and Mental Health in the American Continent, was held in Mexico. Now, in 2024, the journal's first issue is being published.

Over the past two decades, the interest in mental health care within the domain of physiotherapy has expanded from a limited area, practiced in a few countries, to an internationally recognized sub-domain of physiotherapy. Mental health has rightfully gained high priority on the agenda of policymakers, particularly due to the experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it remains challenging to convince all healthcare professionals, of the usefulness of physiotherapy in mental health care and psychiatry. Not all physiotherapists are confident that mental health falls within their scope of practice.

The role of physiotherapists in mental health care has evolved beyond strictly somatic rehabilitation, and they have become indispensable professionals within the mental health care landscape. Their core focus in mental health is to optimize well-being and empower individuals by promoting physical activity, exercise, movement awareness, and functional movement, integrating physical and mental aspects. Physiotherapists utilize the “movement body” to enhance well-being, empowerment, and quality of life for individuals seeking help. They address both the dysfunctional aspects and the individual's healthy possibilities of the person struggling with psychological problems to influence somatic, psychological, and social functioning.

In 2019, the *International Organization of Physiotherapy in Mental Health* formulated six key elements to clarify the specific interventions within the field of physiotherapy in mental health. These elements include physical activity, exercise, and physical fitness, including motor ability and motor cognitive training; sensory, body, and movement awareness; stress and tension regulation; closeness/touch/massage; physio-education, which includes lifestyle and pain management; pediatric psychiatry-specific elements; and old age psychiatric-specific elements.

In addition to these elements, additional key elements should be considered: psychologically informed physiotherapy (i.e. the use of psychological strategies within physiotherapy), attention to supported self-management, and rehabilitation of functional somatic disorders.

Psychologically informed physiotherapy, backed by evidence, has proven to be transformative in treating mental health problems by targeting patient beliefs, emotions, and behaviors in a structured and intentional manner. It involves embracing specific techniques such as acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness, trauma-informed pain care, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral therapy, habituation, graded exercise therapy, adaptive pacing therapy, and more.

Physio-education by analogy to psychoeducation is very important but often neglected in physiotherapy. It aims to provide the patient (and their environment) knowledge about various facets of the illness and its treatment from a physiotherapy point of view. Pain is an example where physio-education is of great importance. There is a strong interplay between pain and mental health, creating a vicious cycle of disability. Both physical and emotional pain contribute to reduced quality of life, mobility, and social participation across the lifespan. In the context of chronic pain, physiotherapists collaborate as part of a multidisciplinary team to deliver biopsychosocial interventions, which may include psychologically informed physiotherapy, behavior change techniques, body awareness therapies, physical activity programs, and relaxation activities.

Self-management is crucial for individuals living with chronic conditions, as it enables them to manage symptoms, treatment, physical and psychological consequences, and lifestyle changes. However, in most of the cases and in the long run this is not enough. Therefore, physiotherapists play a key role in **supporting self-management** by providing support to build knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and confidence in individuals with chronic conditions. Supported self-management is the key to prioritizing person-centered care.

Functional somatic disorders refer to impaired functioning of organs (or organ systems), without detectable structural abnormalities (for instance Mass Sociogenic illness (MSI), CFS (myalgia encephalomyelitis), fibromyalgia, hyperventilation syndrome, tension headache, irritable bowel syndrome, temporomandibular joint pains, post whiplash syndromes, multiple chemical or electromagnetic hypersensitivity, War syndrome, Long Covid syndrome, in some cases also the chronic low back pain, ...). Physiotherapy interventions for these disorders focus on symptom and energy management.

In our diverse and dynamic society, physiotherapists must have a deep respect for diversity. Recognizing and accepting individuals as unique and valuable on an unconditional basis can enhance their feelings of self-worth and self-respect. The field of physiotherapy in mental health needs to embrace this diversity and seek innovative and adapted methods and techniques to effectively address the needs of various populations.

The aging population, the chronically (mental) ill people, and the displaced people due to disasters and conflicts, all call for expanding our field and stepping out of our comfort zones. Physiotherapists working in mental health must become clinical chameleons, ready to adapt and tailor their approaches to the specific needs, contexts and culture of their patients.

Current expectations in healthcare include the demand for faster and better treatments, integration within interdisciplinary teams, and respect for other healthcare professionals. However, physiotherapists need to acknowledge their own limitations. Dealing with individuals with mental health problems can sometimes be challenging and even evoke feelings of powerlessness. It is essential to understand that individuals with a lack of motivation may not be receptive to help. Therefore, physiotherapists need to extend their motivational skills, inspiring and encouraging individuals to engage in the therapeutic process.

Inviting people with mental health problems to engage in physiotherapy is about initiating a dialogue rather than seeking an immediate solution. Opening up a dialogue allows an understanding of the individual's unique needs, preferences, and goals. It provides an opportunity for collaboration between the physiotherapist and the individual to develop a personalized treatment plan that aligns with their specific mental health concerns. Successful treatment should be based on the person's point of view, ensuring that their voice is heard and their treatment is tailored to their needs.

We hope that this magazine will become a source of inspiration for all physiotherapists, which are working in the field of mental health.

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