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Mental Health and Physiotherapy

Background

Good mental health is fundamental to the well-being of individuals, families and communities.¹ Poor mental health is identified as one of the biggest causes of disability, poor quality of life and reduced productivity.

In the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults, 1 in 5 adults reported having had a mental disorder within 12 months of the survey being undertaken. Some 45 per cent of Australians identified having had a mental health disorder at some point in their life,² and 25 per cent of people with a musculoskeletal condition were also identified as having a mental health condition.

Mental health conditions are influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, social, environmental and economic factors. People affected by mental health disorders have higher levels of mortality and morbidity, with an increased prevalence of cardiovascular disease, ischaemic heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, respiratory disease and suicide.^{3 4 5 6} A strong association between people with mental health conditions reporting multiple pain sites has also been identified.⁷

The correlations between poor mental health and an increased prevalence of chronic and preventable diseases, musculoskeletal conditions and multiple areas of pain emphasises the need for an effective and holistic multidisciplinary approach to the management of this condition.⁸ Combinations of disorders have a cumulative effect on disability with 75 per cent of people with both physical and mental health conditions reporting mild to severe disability.¹

The role of physiotherapy in improving mental health

Physiotherapists are seen as experts in aspects of physical health care and can offer:⁹

- Non-pharmacological management of pain.¹⁰
- Expertise in prescribing individualised exercise programs, which can improve mood, promote wellbeing and address co-morbidities associated with mental health diagnoses.^{20 21}
- Interventions to address physical issues of people with mental health diagnoses which hinder social participation and recovery, eg. minimising or counteracting the side-effects some of psychotropic medications.^{11 12 13}
- Expertise in motivating, where appropriate, patients and promoting self-management in the context of mental and physical health issues.
- Management of falls and mobility issues for older people and developmental issues for children and young people.
- Expert advice and intervention to address impaired body awareness and reduce dissociation (disconnection from 'thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity'¹⁴) associated with poor mental health.^{15 16 17}

- Development and delivery of individually-tailored lifestyle and weight management advice and programs.

Physiotherapists are highly trained and experienced in managing physiological conditions such as musculoskeletal conditions, cardiorespiratory and neurological conditions. Physiotherapists working in the mental health sector were amongst the first to apply holistic and biopsychosocial approaches to physiotherapy assessment and interventions – these approaches are now recognised within the physiotherapy profession and utilised in other areas including complex pain management.¹⁸

Through a multidisciplinary approach, physiotherapists can address the physical well-being of people with mental health conditions from across the lifespan. Improvements to physical well-being can improve mental well-being and prevent the development of mental health conditions, such as depression which is often associated with other physiological conditions.¹⁹ There is evidence that improvements in body function including balance, posture and flexibility are linked to a sense of improved security and better self-esteem.¹⁶ Improvements to posture, for example, can benefit self-image and raise mood, in addition to decreasing back or neck pain.⁴ As well as preventing its onset, strong evidence also exists to suggest that an appropriate exercise regime effectively improves the well-being of people with depression.^{20 21}

Physiotherapists can also encourage people with mental health conditions to take an active role in their own care by supporting and providing resources to facilitate self-management. This has been acknowledged to be fundamental to the role of physiotherapy when working with people with poor mental health.¹⁷

It is accepted that people with mental health conditions may take longer to respond to treatment, and often necessary to first develop appropriate rapport with the individual, particularly in an environment where they are always being ‘talked to’, and rarely, if ever, touched.²²

It is acknowledged that enhancing physical health will promote mental well-being. With an established role in assessing and diagnosing musculoskeletal and physical conditions, physiotherapists can be engaged in planning, decision making, advocating for, and case management of the physical health of people with mental health conditions.

Access to physiotherapy for people with mental illness

The ability of patients with a mental health condition who require access to physiotherapy intervention for treatment or management of a physical condition is currently inconsistent and many may only have a small chance of accessing the treatment that they need.

Despite the strong connection between physical well-being and mental health, and the recognition of the poor management of the physical health needs of a person with a mental health condition,²³ there are legislative, financial and other circumstantial barriers that have led to a general lack of recognition and understanding of the value of physiotherapy intervention to address the physical well-being of patients with mental health conditions.

The APA contends that these barriers need to be addressed so people with a mental health condition can have optimal access to the physiotherapy services that they require.

The APA position

Physiotherapists are able to positively impact on the well-being of people with mental health conditions through health promotion, providing assistance with pain and chronic disease management and facilitating self-management and dealing with the co-morbidities associated with mental illness.

The position of the Australian Physiotherapy Association is that:

- The physiotherapy profession has a clear role in managing the physical needs of people with mental health conditions.
- Enhancing physical health will promote mental well-being and may prevent the development of co-morbid mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety.
- Physiotherapists are highly trained and experienced in managing physiological conditions and have the necessary expert knowledge to prevent and manage the physical co-morbidities of mental health conditions.
- Optimal treatment for people with a mental health condition is person-centred with multidisciplinary input which promotes self-management.
- There is a need to enhance the already appropriate skills and knowledge of physiotherapists to meet the specific needs of people with mental health conditions.
- Where there is evidence for the efficacy of physiotherapy interventions, such interventions should be funded through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS).
- The current funding mechanisms that support multidisciplinary team care limit the ability of people with mental health conditions to pay for adequate levels of physiotherapy service. For example, current MBS funding mechanisms do not support health professionals to utilise their clinical judgement to assess the number and type of interventions required to provide person-centred care, and instead are rigid and prescriptive. This severely limits attendance and thus the opportunity for physiotherapy to improve wellness and quality of life.
- Private health insurers should support mental health management programs through rebates to their members for appropriate evidenced-based physiotherapy programs.
- Funding must be flexible enough to ensure that people with mental health conditions are not denied access to physiotherapy.

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