Article Review

Pain Competencies: Why are they missing?

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Original article: Watt-Watson, J., Clark, A.J., Dewar, A., Hadjistavropoulos, T., Morely-Foster, P., O'Leary, C., et al. (2013) The ethics of Canadian entry-to-practice pain competencies: how are we doing?, *Pain Management and Research*, 18 (1), pp. 25- 32.

One could argue that pain is the main reason that people seek care from a physiotherapist. It is important, therefore, that physiotherapists are competent in assessing and treating pain. Interestingly, pain assessment and management are not amongst the essential competencies necessary to become a licensed physiotherapist (Watt-Watson et al., 2013). Watt-Watson et al. (2013) performed a review of all entry-to-practice competency documents for each of the major health professional programs in Canadian universities. They found only dentistry, nursing, and veterinary medicine had specific competencies related to assessment and treatment of pain. Physiotherapy was one of a number of professions that has no reference to pain knowledge, assessment, or management in our core competencies.

In the discussion section, Watt-Watson et al. (2013) pose some interesting questions and comments about what the consequences of not having minimum core competencies in place may be. Since these competencies guide education, beliefs and practices of the clinicians, the ramifications could be profound. They identified that pain is often under assessed and undertreated particularly in long-term care facilities and suggest that inadequate education on pain management is a significant barrier to effective treatment. In fact, they argue that a lack of pain knowledge and management skills leaves clinicians with the inability to adequately solve problems that are pain dominated. Moreover, Watt-Watson et al. (2013) suggest not having any stated competencies for pain is in essence concluding that a baseline understanding of pain assessment and management is not a priority for the profession.

One interesting consideration is the ethical implications for the professions without pain competencies. The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (2003) outlines the following in our code of ethics:

Physiotherapists are committed to act with integrity, to honour the rights and dignity of all individuals, to recognize their responsibility to society, and to pursue a quest for excellence in professional activities.

Watt-Watson et al. (2013) believe that having no structured pain competencies is in breach of our ethical code and does not allow clinicians to practice ethically. Pain assessment and management skills are required to allow patients to become independent and not being competent with the science underlying pain does not pursue a quest for excellence in professional activities. Additionally, not managing pain effectively was identified as harmful to the individual and to society as pain related disability affects the individual's life and has costs to society.

In their recommendations and conclusions, it was outlined that pain education and minimum competencies for the assessment and treatment of pain need to be established at the pre-licensure level as education at the developmental level of professionals is key to their socialization. They suggest educators and licensing bodies need to recognise the need to develop pain competencies.

References

- Canadian Physiotherapy Association (2003) Canadian code of ethics: rules of ethics. http://www.medicine.usask.ca/pt/faculty-resources/faculty-handbook/academic-integrity-and-professionalism/Code%20of%20Ethics%20English.pdf (Accessed: 04 September 2013.
- Watt-Watson, J., Clark, A.J., Dewar, A., Hadjistavropoulos, T., Morely-Foster, P., O'Leary, C., et al. (2013) The ethics of Canadian entry-to-practice pain competencies: how are we doing?, *Pain Management and Research*, 18 (1), pp. 25-32.