ACCESS TO PHYSIOTHERAPY IN RURAL, REMOTE & NORTHERN AREAS OF CANADA

background

In 2015, the CPA undertook an environmental scan related to access to physiotherapy in rural, remote and northern parts of Canada. Between June and September 2015, **50 key informant interviews** were conducted by staff physiotherapist Kerry Kittson. An additional **130 physiotherapists responded** to an online survey about issues related to working in rural practice. All 13 provinces and territories were represented in the interviews and survey. The common themes from the interviews and survey fall under three categories: challenges facing patients; challenges facing physiotherapists; and, general issues related to access to care.

key messages

**Patient-focused common themes**
- Income as a social determinant of health
- Understanding physiotherapy and scope of practice

**Physiotherapist-focused common themes**
- Recruitment and retention issues
- Limited access to continuing education opportunities and mentorship

**Access to care common themes**
- Telehealth as an underutilized service
- Geography and poor weather
- Need for more community-based and publicly funded physiotherapy & health promotion services
- Lack of specialized physiotherapy services and the identity as a generalist
recommendations

1. Recruitment and retention
   - Increase opportunity to work in rural practice during clinical education;
   - Increase mentorship and follow-up with physiotherapists after posting to decrease feeling of social and professional isolation.

2. Tele-practice and technology
   - While ensuring that it does not change the nature of practice, telepractice can mitigate income limitations, harsh weather conditions, and geography;
   - Tele-education and mentorship.

3. Use of electronic outcome measures
   - The CPA's first strategic priority is to have the means to measure, in real time, the effectiveness of physiotherapy across Canada, and has partnered with Focus On Therapeutic Outcomes (FOTO) to achieve this priority;
   - Advocating for the use of eOM allows physiotherapists to not only engage with their patients, but also helps to demonstrate the effectiveness of the physiotherapy profession to enhance health systems change.

4. Physiotherapy in primary health care
   - Physiotherapists are uniquely qualified to assess, improve and/or maintain a patient’s functional independence and physical performance, adding value to the primary health care team;
   - Advocacy through the use of CPA’s Value of Physiotherapy Project fact sheet on Primary Health Care is encouraged.

5. Advocating for the profession
   - Overarching recommendation of advocacy is central to all recommendations;
   - 74.1% of survey responses indicated a need to lobby governments or decision-makers for more resources and programs;
   - Rural and remote physiotherapists and rehabilitation managers should promote the value of physiotherapy;
   - The CPA must also take a leadership role by supporting Branches, Divisions and members, creating advocacy tools and advocating at the federal level to increase access to physiotherapy in rural, remote and northern areas.

Conclusion

The results of this environmental scan emphasize overlapping advocacy points across the country; the next step is identifying how to move forward towards a common goal. Thank you very much to all key informants and survey participants for your support during this environmental scan.

Sources: