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Title: Understanding the learning needs of community physiotherapists

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Sponsor: Pegasus Health (Charitable) Limited

Introduction:

Continuing professional development (CPD) for physiotherapists, as with other health professionals, assists them to provide effective and efficient care to patients. There are mandatory requirements for the physiotherapy recertification programme, which is undertaken every three years to ensure necessary CPD is being carried out. The Pegasus Health small group education programme (SGEP) is a peer-led programme, which was initially established two decades ago for GPs (1993) and has further expanded to involve practice nurses (1998) and most recently, pharmacists (2010). The programme runs Canterbury wide and its underpinning philosophy is to promote a primary care team approach both to care and to continuing education. The SGEP aims to improve inter-professional collaboration and understanding of health professional roles, to identify where evidence based gaps exist, and to explore and promote innovative ways of working to improve efficiency.

Aim:

The purpose of the study was to complete a learning needs analysis of Canterbury physiotherapists to establish the most effective modes of delivering ongoing CPD and whether the CPD currently available was meeting their needs and requirements. The study aimed to identify opportunities for further development of the Pegasus Health education programme in order to deliver sustainable professional development for community physiotherapists. The project also aimed to explore whether the potential addition of physiotherapy to the SGEP could help extend collegial working and learning relationships across multiple disciplines, improving communication, and therefore providing better outcomes for patients.

Method:

A brief literature review on the learning needs and educational requirements of community physiotherapists was carried out, along with research to determine CPD available to physiotherapists. A questionnaire was developed and sent out to survey physiotherapists' satisfaction and whether current engagement and level of available CPD meets their needs. The survey was sent out electronically to all Physiotherapy New Zealand registered physiotherapists in Canterbury and the West Coast. Following the questionnaire a focus group was carried out to explore ideas arising from the questionnaire and to discuss CPD needs in more depth. Formal invitations were sent out to 10 individuals to take part in the focus group discussion. The discussion was recorded and transcribed and themes were identified and explored in light of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected. A simple thematic analysis was then undertaken.

Results:

Ninety responses were received from the 477 questionnaires sent (response rate 19%). The learning needs analysis carried out from the questionnaire identified that respondents had no difficulty in achieving the necessary CPD hours. However, over half of the respondents indicated they did not think the CPD currently available was effective at meeting their professional development needs.

The survey indicated the greatest reasons for physiotherapists undertaking CPD was to review current evidence, to fill knowledge/skills gaps which may have been triggered by specific patient cases, and for their personal interest.

There was a gap identified in both the formal education and professional activities categories. The survey results indicated respondents agreed time and cost to be the greatest barriers to meeting their CPD requirements. Some 94% of the respondents indicated they would be interested in peer-led education sessions, and 87% of these said they would be able to attend sessions in Christchurch. Overall, 95% of respondents said they believed the sessions would be beneficial for their professional development. Many respondents felt peer-led education sessions would strongly help to improve physiotherapy collegial working, and improve inter-disciplinary relationships and patient outcomes.

Four clear themes emerged from the focus group discussion and these correlated well with the results from the survey. The focus group attendees felt there were barriers to carrying out CPD, including: money, time, format of CPD information, and motivation. It was suggested there is a need for greater intra and inter disciplinary collaboration and communication, and a need for applicable and evidence based information in order to promote best practice. The idea of a more holistic approach to patients and their treatment was also brought up in the discussion, and attendees felt this would be achievable with improved collaboration and inter-professional communication.

Conclusion:

Various conclusions can be drawn in relation to the aims of the project. It was found from the learning needs analysis carried out in both the survey and discussion that, although it was not difficult for physiotherapists to meet the recommended CPD, gaps may be present in the formal and professional categories currently provided in Canterbury. This may represent an opportunity for Pegasus Health to provide education in the form of large group sessions or workshops in the future. Physiotherapists felt the CPD was not fully meeting their professional development needs, and a number of barriers were evident which prevented physiotherapists from maximising the benefits from their CPD, including time and cost. Themes emerging from the focus group discussion included the idea of greater collaboration and communication inter-professionally, and a more holistic approach to patient care. The Pegasus Health SGEP encompassed these ideas and was well received by survey respondents and those who attended the focus group. An initial pilot of a peer-led education session in the future would also be useful to trial and gauge whether physiotherapists' involvement in this programme would be a success.