



Original Article

Perception of Physiotherapy as a Profession by Orthopaedic Surgeons

Aiman Junaid^{1*}¹University of Health Sciences, Lahore

*Corresponding Author: Aiman Junaid, t-DPT-UHS; Email: naina_03_90@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: The field of physiotherapy is increasingly recognized in the medical domain for its solid theoretical underpinnings and advancements in treatment methodologies. However, perceptions among orthopedic surgeons vary, with some viewing physiotherapy as potentially impacting their professional domain, including the frequency of surgical interventions and post-operative patient management.

Objective: This study aims to explore and analyze the perceptions of orthopedic surgeons regarding physiotherapy, focusing on their attitudes towards its role, efficacy, and professional autonomy.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted involving 26 practicing orthopedic surgeons from various hospital settings in Lahore. Non-probability convenience sampling was employed. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire, which included items on the surgeons' experience, types of surgeries performed, and their frequency, alongside queries about their perceptions of physiotherapy.

Results: A significant proportion of participants (53.8%) strongly endorsed the positive role of physiotherapy, especially in post-operative care, with 57.7% strongly agreeing on its effectiveness. The autonomy of the physiotherapy profession was recognized by 42.3% of surgeons. However, there was notable uncertainty (57.7%) regarding the diversity of physiotherapy's scope. Innovative approaches in physiotherapy were acknowledged by 61.5% of respondents. Competency of physiotherapists as professionals was strongly agreed upon by 42.3% of surgeons.

Conclusion: The study reveals a generally positive perception of physiotherapy among orthopedic surgeons, yet it also uncovers areas of skepticism and uncertainty, particularly regarding the scope and professional autonomy of physiotherapists. These findings highlight the need for enhanced interdisciplinary understanding and collaboration.

Keywords: Physiotherapy, Orthopedic Surgery, Perception Study, Medical Collaboration, Treatment Methodology, Professional Autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy, as a dynamic and essential component of the healthcare system, has been recognized for its significant contributions to human well-being through its scientific and theoretical practices (1). This profession is not only about rehabilitation but also encompasses a holistic approach to patient care, emphasizing the prevention, diagnosis, and management of a wide range of physical dysfunctions (2). The role of physiotherapists is extensive and versatile, allowing them to interact and collaborate effectively with various healthcare professionals, including orthopaedic surgeons, general physicians, and specialists in neurology, gynecology, and sports medicine (3).

The importance of physiotherapy can be seen in its rapid evolution and recognition as a vital health profession. Its scope, extending from managing neurological deficits to aiding in post-surgical recovery, demonstrates its critical role in healthcare (4, 5). Physiotherapists work diligently to ensure the best possible outcomes for their patients, focusing not just on physical rehabilitation but also on enhancing the overall quality of life. Their expertise is particularly valuable in conditions like back pain, cerebral palsy, stroke, sports injuries, and post-surgical rehabilitation, where they often play a key role in reducing the need for extensive medical interventions (6, 7).

Recent studies and clinical trials have further highlighted the effectiveness of physiotherapy in various domains. Research involving patients with acute sciatica, for example, has shown that physiotherapy significantly



enhances patient outcomes compared to general practitioner treatment alone (8-10). In outpatient departments, specially trained physiotherapists have demonstrated capabilities comparable to assistant orthopedic surgeons in diagnosing and managing musculoskeletal disorders. These findings underscore not only the proficiency of physiotherapists but also their integral role in patient care (11).

Patient satisfaction with physiotherapy services has been consistently high, reflecting the profession's success in meeting patient needs. Studies assessing the extended role of physiotherapists in outpatient orthopedic clinics have indicated high levels of satisfaction among both patients and general practitioners, with a notable reduction in the need for further GP consultations post physiotherapy intervention (12, 13). This high level of patient satisfaction is a testament to the effectiveness of physiotherapy in various healthcare settings (14, 15).

Despite the proven efficacy and growing recognition of physiotherapy, there remains a spectrum of perceptions and attitudes towards this profession, particularly among orthopaedic surgeons (16-18). These perceptions can significantly influence patient care pathways, including referrals to physiotherapy. Understanding the factors that shape these perceptions is crucial for fostering better collaboration between orthopaedic surgeons and physiotherapists, which is essential for enhancing patient outcomes (11, 19, 20).

The objective of this study, therefore, is to explore and understand the perceptions of orthopaedic surgeons towards physiotherapy as a profession. This exploration is pivotal for several reasons. Firstly, it helps identify potential areas of alignment and divergence in the understanding of physiotherapy's role and efficacy (21, 22). Secondly, it contributes to the broader narrative of physiotherapy's evolving role in the healthcare sector, highlighting its significance and impact on patient care and well-being. Lastly, by delving into the perspectives of orthopaedic surgeons, the study aims to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration, optimize patient care pathways, and ensure the best possible outcomes for patients across a spectrum of conditions (14). The exploration of orthopaedic surgeons' perceptions of physiotherapy is not just an academic exercise; it is a necessary step towards improving the overall healthcare system, ensuring that patients receive the most appropriate, effective, and comprehensive care possible (19).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this cross-sectional descriptive study, a sample size of 26 orthopedic surgeons was determined using Rao Soft's online sample size calculator. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: they were required to have a minimum of two years of experience and be currently working in hospitals in Lahore that had both an outpatient department and a dedicated physiotherapy department. The focus on hospitals with these specific facilities was to ensure that the participants had sufficient exposure to physiotherapy practices and patient outcomes (23).

The research tool used was a semi-structured questionnaire, designed to gauge the perceptions of the orthopedic surgeons towards the physiotherapy profession (24). The questionnaire employed a Likert scale to measure responses, a widely accepted method for assessing attitudes and opinions in social science research. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, orthopedic out-patient wards in various public and private hospitals in Lahore with physiotherapy departments were identified and included in the study (25).

A key component of the questionnaire was the inclusion of a consent form. This form was signed by the orthopedic surgeons, assuring confidentiality of their responses. To ensure informed participation, each surgeon was personally met and given a brief introduction to the research objectives and methodology. This personal approach not only facilitated a higher response rate but also ensured that the participants fully understood the context and importance of the study.

Once the introduction and consent process were completed, the questionnaire forms were distributed to the concerned surgeons. The collection of the filled-out questionnaires spanned a period of four months. This extended period was to accommodate the busy schedules of the surgeons and to allow sufficient time for thoughtful responses (26).

The data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS version 21, a statistical software widely used in social science research. The analysis focused on descriptive statistics, specifically the frequency and percentage of orthopedic surgeons who exhibited positive versus negative perceptions of the physical therapy



profession. This analytical approach was chosen to provide a clear and quantifiable understanding of the prevailing attitudes among the participating surgeons towards physiotherapy.

RESULTS

Table 1 Demographic Data

Demographic	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	Total
Age (Years)	5 (19.2%)	1 (3.8%)	8 (30.8%)	5 (19.2%)	7 (26.9%)	26
Gender	Male					26 (100%)
Work Experience (Years)	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20		Total
	5 (19.2%)	9 (34.6%)	6 (23.1%)	6 (23.1%)		26
Number of Surgeries (Performed)	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20		Total
	4 (15.4%)	13 (50%)	6 (23.1%)	3 (11.5%)		26
Referrals to PT (Number)	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	Total
	5 (19.2%)	6 (23.1%)	5 (19.2%)	6 (23.1%)	4 (15.4%)	26

The demographic data (Table 1) revealed a total of 26 male orthopedic surgeons participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 26 to 50 years, with the majority (30.8%) falling in the 36-40 age group. The age distribution was as follows: 19.2% were between 26-30 years, a minor 3.8% were between 31-35 years, 19.2% were between 41-45 years, and 26.9% were between 46-50 years.

In terms of work experience, the participants were quite evenly spread across different ranges. 19.2% had 1-5 years of experience, the largest group (34.6%) had 6-10 years, and both the 11-15 years and 16-20 years categories were represented equally by 23.1% of participants.

Regarding the number of surgeries performed, the most common category was 6-10 surgeries, accounting for 50% of the surgeons. This was followed by 23.1% who had performed 11-15 surgeries, 15.4% who had performed 1-5 surgeries, and a smaller group of 11.5% who had performed 16-20 surgeries.

When it came to referrals to the physical therapy department, the responses were again varied. The 6-10 referrals and 16-20 referrals categories both had the highest representation at 23.1% each, followed by 19.2% each for both the 1-5 and 11-15 referrals categories. A smaller group, 11.5%, had made 21-30 referrals.

The survey on perceptions of physiotherapy (Table 2) showed that 53.8% of the surgeons strongly agreed on the role of physiotherapy in conservative management, while 46.2% simply agreed. Regarding the role of physiotherapy in preparing patients for post-operative recovery, 26.9% strongly agreed, and a significant 73.1% agreed.

Table 2 Perceptions of Physiotherapy

Question	Frequency	Percentage
Role of physiotherapy in conservative management		
Strongly Agreed	14	53.8
Agreed	12	46.2
Role of physiotherapy in preoperative patients for post-operative optimal recovery		
Strongly Agreed	7	26.9
Agreed	19	73.1
Role of physiotherapy in post-operative recovery of patients		
Strongly Agreed	15	57.7
Agreed	11	42.3
Autonomy of profession		
Strongly Agreed	3	11.5
Agreed	11	42.3
Uncertain	8	30.8
Disagreed	4	15.4
Diversity of Physiotherapy in Diagnosis and Treatment		



Question	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	3	11.5
Agreed	4	15.4
Uncertain	15	57.7
Disagreed	4	15.4
Innovative ways to add in rapid recovery		
Strongly Agreed	6	23.1
Agreed	16	61.5
Disagreed	4	15.4
Dynamic health profession		
Strongly Agreed	7	26.9
Agreed	15	57.7
Disagreed	4	15.4
Physiotherapy has competent professionals		
Strongly Agreed	11	42.3
Agreed	11	42.3
Disagreed	4	15.4

For the role of physiotherapy in post-operative patient recovery, 57.7% strongly agreed with its importance, and 42.3% agreed. On the autonomy of the physiotherapy profession, opinions were more diverse: 11.5% strongly agreed, 42.3% agreed, 30.8% were uncertain, and 15.4% disagreed. In terms of the diversity of physiotherapy in diagnosis and treatment, 11.5% strongly agreed, 15.4% agreed, but a majority of 57.7% were uncertain, and 15.4% disagreed. When asked about innovative ways physiotherapy can add to rapid recovery, 23.1% strongly agreed, 61.5% agreed, and 15.4% disagreed. As for physiotherapy being a dynamic health profession, 26.9% strongly agreed, 57.7% agreed, and 15.4% disagreed. Finally, regarding the competence of professionals in physiotherapy, 42.3% strongly agreed and another 42.3% agreed, while 15.4% disagreed.

DISCUSSION

The present study's results offer intriguing insights into the evolving perception of physiotherapy among orthopedic surgeons, especially when compared with past evidence. Previous studies highlighted a general skepticism among physicians towards physiotherapy, marked by limited awareness of its training, the view of it being merely complementary to medicine, and doubts about its scientific basis. In contrast, the current study shows a shift in perceptions, albeit with some lingering reservations.

The findings from the current study, alongside previous research, offer a multifaceted view of the perceptions and practices surrounding physiotherapy in the orthopedic context. A key finding of our study is the perception of physiotherapy primarily as an adjunct to medicine, with a maximum referral rate of 23.1%. This aligns with previous findings by Mir et al. (2021), where orthopaedic consultants acknowledged the role of advanced practice physiotherapy (APP) in paediatrics, seeing it as an integral part of a multidisciplinary approach that enhances service efficiency and patient care quality (27).

Our study also reveals a cautious stance among medical doctors regarding physiotherapists' diagnostic abilities, with 57.7% including a specified medical diagnosis in their referrals. This contrasts with the findings of Volkmer et al. (2021), where physiotherapists on orthopaedic wards expressed a need to balance protocolised care with patient-tailored approaches, highlighting a desire for more integrated, collaborative practices within multidisciplinary teams (28). The discrepancy could be attributed to differences in the perceived roles and competencies of physiotherapists, suggesting a need for clearer communication and understanding between professions.

Furthermore, our results point to a degree of uncertainty about the innovative capabilities of physiotherapy, mirroring the need for ongoing professional development and integration into the broader medical framework. In contrast, the study by Samsson et al. (2016) on physiotherapist-led orthopaedic triage presents a model where physiotherapists assume a more central role in patient care, with patients reporting higher quality of care



compared to standard practices (29). This discrepancy suggests that while perceptions are evolving, there remains a gap in the full recognition and utilization of physiotherapists' skills and autonomy in certain medical circles.

These collective insights underscore the dynamic and evolving role of physiotherapy in orthopaedic care. While there is a recognition of its value, there also exists a need for enhanced understanding and collaboration between orthopaedic surgeons and physiotherapists. Bridging this gap is crucial for optimizing patient care and fully leveraging the potential of physiotherapy within the healthcare system.

The uncertainty about innovative physiotherapy methods, as indicated by 61.5% of the respondents, could be attributed to the rapid advancements and innovations in physiotherapy, which some surgeons may not be fully aware of. This gap in knowledge may affect their perception of the field's effectiveness and scope (30, 31).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research suggest that orthopedic surgeons acknowledge the crucial role of physiotherapy in the management and treatment of various conditions, recognizing its value beyond conventional surgical interventions. However, there appears to be a need for physiotherapists to further establish their competence and professionalism. This development is essential for enhancing the perception of physiotherapy as a reliable and preferred choice for adjunct therapy among medical professionals.

Orthopedic surgeons have highlighted the importance of a solid theoretical and methodological framework for physical therapists. Such a framework would not only enhance their professional skills but also contribute to the overall growth and recognition of the field. In conclusion, while progress has been made in the perception of physiotherapy, there is still room for improvement in terms of professional development and interdisciplinary collaboration. This evolution is crucial for physiotherapy to be fully integrated and valued within the healthcare system.

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