

The role of the specialist learning disability physiotherapist in the 24-hour postural management of adults with learning disabilities

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Summary

Specialist learning disability physiotherapists play a key role in the postural management of adults with learning disabilities (AWLD) with complex physical disability. This abstract presents the results of a modified Delphi technique study exploring the evidence and expert opinion to develop clinical practice guidelines for 24-hour postural management for AWLD.

Aims & Objectives

The researchers present the results of a modified Delphi technique study exploring the available evidence and expert opinion about the role of the specialist learning disability physiotherapist, including 24-hour postural management. The results developed clinical practice guidelines outlining the key roles and features of delivering quality physiotherapy and 24-hour postural management to AWLD. These aim to standardise the delivery of this core area of physiotherapy across the United Kingdom (UK).

Background

Many AWLD have postural needs due to the high prevalence of neurological impairments, abnormal tone and movement, and mobility problems (Mansell, 2010). This population is growing with an increase in life expectancy, and the numbers of young people with complex disability surviving into adulthood (Public Health England, 2016). As a result, 24-hour postural management has become a core role of the specialist learning disability physiotherapist. There is currently a lack of available postural management services (Public Health England, 2018) and wide variations in the commissioning and delivery of learning disability services around the UK (LD Senate, 2015). This has left a significant service gap which impacts directly on the physical health of AWLD.

Method

The researchers conducted a five round Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust sponsored, HRA approved modified Delphi technique study. The study involved a systematic literature review and four rounds of questionnaires to explore the opinions of an expert panel recruited via the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists for People with Learning Disabilities. The first two questionnaires aimed to reach consensus for the definition, different roles of, and clinical practice guidelines for the specialist learning disability physiotherapist; the third assessed the stability of responses; the final prioritised roles in order of importance.

Results

The agreed definition states that learning disability physiotherapists provide specialist assessment, treatment and management to AWLD whose needs cannot be successfully met by mainstream services, even when reasonable adjustments are made. To deliver this, physiotherapists are specialists in making the adjustments required to provide physiotherapy to AWLD that are unreasonable for mainstream services. They are specialists in the areas of physiotherapy that are critical to managing the physical needs of AWLD including 24-hr postural management, and have generalist knowledge and skills in a broad range of aspects of physiotherapy and relevant areas of healthcare.

The round one literature review identified 28 relevant publications discussing 24-hour postural management. This included seven government publications, four NICE guidelines, three research articles and 12 pieces of grey literature. These were analysed, and 16 clinical practice statements were developed and sent to an expert panel of 53 learning disability physiotherapists with a broad range of experience from different health sectors and regions of the UK. They rated and commented on each statement, and documented additional roles that were not identified in the literature.

In round two, 100% of the participants rated 24-hour postural management as very important and all the clinical practice statements reached consensus (>80% scoring agree or strongly agree on a four-point Likert scale). Participants suggested an additional 25 statements which all reached consensus in round three. Following analysis, the final clinical practice guidelines for 24-hour postural management consists of 36 statements.

In round four, participants were asked to consider changing their score in the light of group responses. No significant changes were made to 24-hour postural management (Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test z-score 0.00, p-value 1.0). In round five, 100% of participants stated that specialist disability physiotherapists must prioritise the delivery of 24-hour postural management.

Discussion

The results of the study overwhelmingly identified that delivering 24hour postural management is an essential role for the community learning disability team (CLDT). Learning disability physiotherapists must develop specialist knowledge and skills in 24-hour postural management. This includes providing comprehensive assessment, developing and delegating postural management plans, offering reviews, and providing training and education to the person, their care networks and healthcare professionals.

Specialist learning disability physiotherapists make the adjustments required to overcome the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to providing successful postural management to AWLD. For example, offering creative, adapted and flexible assessments and intervention over a period of time, and co-ordinating the person's management through partnership working with care networks and the multi-disciplinary team. Physiotherapists must also develop the systems and pathways with the healthcare services that are essential to the delivery of 24-hour postural management, including local wheelchair, orthotics, spasticity and respiratory teams. It is these adjustments that overcome the health inequalities AWLD experience. They go beyond what is reasonable for mainstream services, and make the specialist learning disability physiotherapist a critical part of the postural management team.

Specialist Learning Disability physiotherapy teams must be adequately resourced to deliver high quality 24-hour postural management, if they are to meet the postural and health needs of the local population of AWLD. The study has developed evidence and expert opinion based clinical practice guidelines for the 24-hour postural management of AWLD to enhance and standardise the delivery and commissioning of this core function of the CLDT across the UK.

References

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