

Hong Kong Physiotherapy Association

Physiotherapy and Dementia Care

The increase in ageing population has resulted in increased demand on health and aged care services in Hong Kong. Older people are at higher risk of developing mental health problems such as dementia, depression, together with their increasing levels of physical frailness associated with degeneration in the nervous, musculoskeletal, and cardiopulmonary systems.

Physiotherapy has been one of the earliest and major allied health providers in Hong Kong to serve the population with comprehensive rehabilitation expertise across life span, and adopting holistic bio-psycho-social approaches in addressing health care issues. Physiotherapists have always been committed to specialized mental health management to address the physical, cognitive, psychological and social needs of older people, their families and carers.

A co-ordinated service planning and service delivery is required to address the multiple demands and to ensure the health care and supported needs of older people with dementia and their families are met. Physiotherapists are ready to provide appropriate clinical assessment and consultation/liaison, joint care planning and case management to maximize their recovery independence and quality of life. With contemporary physiotherapy service models conducted in different HA and non-HA /NGO settings, this discussion forum will be a golden opportunity for the high risk and diagnosed dementia patients to have a full spectrum of specialized professional service to meet their care needs at different stages.

I. Current Physiotherapy Intervention for Dementia aims to:

1. Increase mobility functions through
 - In- and out-door mobility training
 - Strengthening & stretching exercises
 - Balance & gait speed re-education
 - Sensori-motor-cognitive interaction programmes
2. Increase awareness of self and environment through
 - Fall prevention programmes
 - Sensory integration enhancement training
 - Movement therapy for body-mind wellness
 - Activities involving meaningful tasks, e.g., aquatic exercise, dance, leisure sports, Tai Chi, Qigong BaDuanJin, horticulture
3. Improve mood and management of behavior problems through
 - Physical exercises so as to reduce stress and improve sleep quality
 - Joyful activities

- Relaxation
4. Increase physical health and comfort through
 - Pain management using physical modalities such as electrical stimulation, massage, acupuncture
 - Cardiopulmonary fitness for functional endurance
 - Carer education and training about communication and physical handling of patients
 5. Empower patients, families and carers, as well as general public through
 - Community physiotherapy services
 - Case management
 - Public educational talks regarding primary and secondary prevention of dementia

II. Limitations

1. Physiotherapist is not currently counted as one of the multi-disciplinary team members in the model of mental health service development.
2. Physiotherapist is not on the care list for dementia supplement (only nurses, occupational therapists and social workers)
3. Common physical incapacitations associated with dementia and the manifestations are often under-minded in mental health treatment priorities.
4. Service co-ordination and integration for prevention and treatment of dementia and the comorbidity, for which advanced physiotherapy practitioners could contribute, has often been neglected.
5. Restricted information and channels for access of professional services/input from allied health, including physiotherapists.

III. The Way Ahead

Being rehabilitation expertise for patients suffering from chronic illness, physiotherapists are health care professionals qualified and committed to promote health, prevent illnesses, reduce activity limitations, and enhance participation using holistic, evidence-based and dynamic management/interventions to patients and their carers. Rectifying the loophole and lopsided service model in dementia care, bringing in a real multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary care across all health care and social sectors should be seriously considered.

1. Preventive roles

- ◆ Physiotherapists can help to screen and to assess elders in community or primary settings for early detection of subjects at risk of dementia.
- ◆ Aerobic exercises is evident to enhance the brain health(1) Physiotherapists can prescribe exercise program which suits the aging stages for the optimization of brain health .
- ◆ Introduction of exercise activities helps to reduce several risk factors for cognitive decline including hypertension, dyslipidemia, and diabetes(2)

Recommendation: Specific physiotherapy assessment should be included in an integrated multi-disciplinary approach for early detection of dementia at community and primary care settings

2 Promotion of functional & active lifestyle for the ageing population

- ◆ Base on the current scientific literatures, physiotherapists can make practical recommendations regarding physical activities to prevent cognitive decline or the disease in healthy subjects, and to slow down disease progression for the prevention of complications in demented patients.
- ◆ Holistic approach for timely pain management for the elders would avoid associated physical and psychosocial sufferings which might end up with mental deterioration.
- ◆ Physiotherapists are professionally sharp in the detection of body movements as body language, early detection of adnormal body movement such as movement co-ordination, walking gait, balance could help to sustain the body mind wellness of the dementia patients at risk.

Recommendations: physiotherapy specialized input should be included as one of the mandatory professional service in dementia care and recovery programs

3 Families and care giver support

- Physiotherapists are experts in musculoskeletal care. They can provide ergonomic advice to care givers for safe patient transfer and related manual handling techniques for their own protection in the caring process.
- Physiotherapists can train care givers or families to do passive exercises and lung hygiene to patients at home ,thus avoiding unplanned re admission of patients
- Physiotherapists can also provide health related exercises to care givers to ensure their physical endurance in the caring process and thus reduce their caring stress.

Recommendation To strengthen community physiotherapy support for the maintenance of

physical well being and the empowerment of the care givers to sustain continuity of dementia care

References

1. Arch Neurol. 2010 Jan;67(1):71-9.

Effects of aerobic exercise on mild cognitive impairment: a controlled trial.

2. JAMA. 2008 Sep 3;300(9):1027-37.

Effect of physical activity on cognitive function in older adults at risk for Alzheimer disease: a randomized trial