

## EDITORIAL

# Physical Therapists in the Field of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

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This is the Era of specialization and professionals in all areas are trying to improve their knowledge and skills for the betterment of their patients. Although some time this creates confusion in minds when there is a thin line to set the boundaries in the scope of practice in different specialties. The same is true for physical therapists and physiatrists in Pakistan. This profession was came into being in the US in 1921 with the combined efforts of Mary McMillan who founded the American Women Physiotherapy Association and few renowned physicians Dr.Frank Granger (Harvard's Graduate School of Medicine) Dr.Elliott Brackett and Dr.Joel Goldthwaite, chief surgeons in the Army's Orthopedic Military Corps.The title of physical therapist was proposed for the graduates of the profession but the physicians were in favor that this will be used for physicians only but later on with the efforts of Mary McMillan the non-physician graduates of the program were allowed by the court to use the same title . The Physicians then came up with the term physiatrist for physicians with such training. Since then the development of physical medicine and rehabilitation started on two tracks and different boards and association were established.<sup>1</sup>

The American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation defines Physiatrist; "A specialist in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation evaluates and treats patients with physical and/or cognitive impairments and disabilities that result from musculoskeletal conditions, neurological conditions, or other medical conditions. Physiatrists have expertise in therapeutic exercise, medications, and injections for management of pain and spasticity; electro diagnosis; prostheses and other equipment to assist daily activities, and coordinate treatment to help patients improve their physical, psychological, social, and vocational function".<sup>2</sup>

The American Physical Therapy Association defines;

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"Physical therapists are health care professionals who help individuals maintain, restore, and improve movement, activity, and functioning, thereby enabling optimal performance and enhancing health, well-being, and quality of life. Their services prevent, minimize, or eliminate impairments of body functions and structures, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.<sup>3</sup> The Association also established a document that "Physical therapists shall establish a diagnosis for each patient/client. Prior to making a patient/client management decision, physical therapists shall utilize the diagnostic process in order to establish a diagnosis for the specific conditions in need of the physical therapist's attention".<sup>4</sup> The physical therapists also authorized for electro diagnostic procedure e.g. NCS and EMG with special training in that area. According to APTA limited prescription and nonprescription medication used for physical therapy interventions is also a component of patient/client management and thus within the scope of physical therapist practice.<sup>4</sup> In UK the physical therapists are allowed for intra articular injections and they also have been granted the full independent prescribing rights.<sup>5</sup> Based on these facts most of the time conflict arises among physical therapists and physiatrists .Although they have different scope of practice.

The word Physician Practitioner of PM&R and Non-Physician Practitioner of PM&R will clarify the difference.

If we look into the education level of physical therapist in Pakistan is equal to 17 years of schooling according to Higher Education Commission (HEC) criteria and the degree title Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) has been approved by HEC. Therefore with all these developments and innovations the scope of practice expanded too. Another edge of the physical therapists that they are well equipped with hands on techniques in the form of manual therapy (Mobilization and manipulation) for pain relief and movement dysfunctions. The neurologists, orthopedic surgeons and rheumatologists prefer to refer their patients to physical therapists directly for rehabilitation. If it comes to the application of physical agents, physical therapists have in depth knowledge of indications, contra indications and operation of all the physical agents including ultrasonic therapy, electrotherapy, hydro therapy

and Cryotherapy. In other modality in physical medicine is the exercise therapy in which the physical therapists are being taught very much in detail and they are trained for specific exercise prescription including endurance, strength, conditioning and work hardening program.

Today's physical therapists have strong basic sciences knowledge including; anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, Microbiology, pharmacology and psychology. They have strong background of biomechanics and based on that they are the suitable clinicians to treat movement dysfunctions or musculoskeletal and neuromuscular disorders of mechanical nature.

Fortunately or unfortunately in Pakistan usually we follow either US or UK practices because we do not have our own defined scope of practice for deferent clinicians and the practice of physical therapists is one of those practices. The consequences of not being regulatory authority in the country to regulate the practice and educational standards of physical therapists, we have mushrooming and substandard institutes producing incompetent professionals which should be a serious concern for the country. The DPT in the country is emerging on the style of podiatric medicine (DPM) a complete degree program with further specialties. In the light of all those innovations and advancements they will be

able to practice physical medicine and rehabilitation as independent non-physician practitioners in the future.

Currently in Pakistan most of the rehabilitation departments in the clinical setups as well as in the academics run by the physical therapists. They are emerging as the rehabilitation specialist with higher qualification and advance clinical skills. The curriculum has been design for the independent practice within the scope of practice. The needs of the society most of the times compel professionals to work together for the betterment of the people which some time create new discipline. The physiatrists and physical therapists are both very important members of the rehabilitation team should recognize and support each other to further develop this field in Pakistan.

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