

IPPA study shows that self-referral to physical therapy works

A major international study examining the nature and outcomes of physical therapy, sponsored by the International Private Practitioners Association (IPPA), has been completed. Its results indicate that physical therapists work safely and effectively as independent practitioners, without need for a doctor referral.

The two-phase study, conducted by UK physiotherapists Lesley Holdsworth and Valerie Webster, collected data from selected physiotherapy practices in eight countries. Having developed a web-based data collection tool, they gathered information about types of access to physical therapy and this was collated with information about patient demography, clinical data and outcome data. "We wanted to capture the practice of physical therapy globally, as well as information on access," says Lesley Holdsworth.

In April this year, the authors presented their findings to the IPPA Executive Committee. "The number of practices involved in the study was not enough for us to say these are definitive results, but these are good observational results which show that international comparisons are possible," says Lesley Holdsworth, who is Head of Health Services Research and Effectiveness for NHS Quality Scotland. "Those in the United States are particularly interested in the results, because in some American States patients cannot get direct access to physical therapists. The results of the study show that patients referring themselves to physical therapists is safe and effective, and they shouldn't need a doctor referral."

But the study is also important because it has captured variations from country to country, and what the drivers of those might be. "The data are interesting because we can use them to ask whether the population going to see physical therapists in, say, the US is different from that going to PTs in Holland. Are there gender differences? Is the type of back pain people go with different? We can identify similarities and differences in the patients and outcomes."

The research is now with IPPA, which has funded it up until now, and the association will decide what steps to take next. "With this data collection we have embarked upon a historically significant piece of research," said Jerry Klug, IPPA Chairman. "The results indicate that multi-national research can be done and, with full cooperation of member organisations, can truly assist in understanding the similarities and differences of private practice organisations globally."

"IPPA is looking for additional funding to further the work already accomplished. As we discuss the future of the project, it is evident that using key contacts within member organisations will be the way to garner support and greater data samples. This will enhance the information already documented. We are currently speaking with foundations and organisations to assist with the funding of the next phase of this important research."

If your organisation is interested in supporting the project, contact Jerry Klug at jlkpt@cablone.net