

World Physical Therapy Day ready-made information sheet 5

Article about physical therapy

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Physical therapists: experts in movement for health throughout the lifespan

By Marilyn Moffat, President of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy

Movement and exercise are fundamental to leading a healthy, happy life – whatever age you may be. The World Health Organization has made physical activity a public health priority. Lack of exercise is estimated to cause 1.9 million deaths a year. It is a significant risk factor for chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes – which now make up 60% of all deaths.

But the profession of physical therapy, known in some countries as physiotherapy, helps millions of people every year to prevent and manage the effects of these conditions, along with the effects of aging, illness, accidents, and the stresses and strains of life.

Physical therapy has a major contribution to make in countering these global problems. It specialises in human movement and physical activity. Physical therapists promote people's health, fitness, and wellness. They identify physical impairments, limitations, and disabilities that prevent people from being as active and independent as they can be, and then they find ways of overcoming them. They maximise people's movement potential.

Many people do not often recognise the contribution physical therapists make in keeping people healthy and independent, whatever age they may be. I conduct workshops around the world, demonstrating how aging adults and patients with chronic health problems can improve their health by learning how to exercise safely under the guidance and instruction of physical therapists.

As we age, fat mass increases and aerobic capacity and muscle mass decrease if we don't get enough exercise. This means less oxygen is delivered to key organs, making daily exercise even more difficult, and a vicious cycle can be set up – especially if sedentary behaviour leads to conditions like heart disease. Routine daily activity can break the cycle, reverse the decline, and lead to a longer life. The World Health Organization says that aging adults should engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity five days a week, if appropriate.

But activity has to be introduced carefully if a person is unfit, older, or has a chronic disease. That's where physical therapists come in. They examine the person, recommend exercises that are safe and appropriate for them, and educate them about how to look for signs of trouble.

Studies have indicated how effective physical therapists are at treating and preventing back pain, joint problems, balance disorders, and strength decline. They can help people affected by disease (such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and HIV/AIDS), injury or amputation live better, more independent, lives.

Their contribution is so important as the world population ages, and unhealthy lifestyles lead to an explosion of lifestyle-related diseases, such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, high blood pressure and obesity.

Around 350 million people globally are now obese (body mass index of 30 or more). Health care costs will continue to rise as a result of this obesity epidemic, not only due to the costs of actually treating obesity and related disorders, but also due to the costs incurred through lost economic activity because obesity-related illness is stopping many people from working.

Physical therapists are the ideal professionals to prescribe exercise programmes for individuals who are overweight or obese. Weight loss will occur with moderate intensity exercises for about 4.5 hours per week when combined with reduced food intake.

Physical therapy doesn't just mean more healthy people, but more productive people who can contribute to countries' economies. That's why the World Confederation for Physical Therapy, which was founded in 1951 to represent physical therapists internationally, champions the principle that every individual is entitled to the highest possible standard of culturally-appropriate health services – including physical therapy. These services are provided in an atmosphere of trust and respect for human dignity and underpinned by sound clinical reasoning and scientific evidence.

WCPT strives to improve global health by encouraging high standards of physical therapy research, education, and practice; supporting communication and exchange of information among physical therapists worldwide; and collaborating with national and international organisations.

Every year on 8th September, physical therapists around the world use World Physical Therapy Day to draw attention to the contribution the profession can make to the health of individuals and nations. It's an opportunity to say what we do, how we do it, why we do it, and why physical therapists are the movement, physical activity, and exercise experts.

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