

COMMENTARY

Strengthening research to navigate the challenges of developing OT, PT, and SP practice in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides context and perspective on the development of research in occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech pathology in the Philippines, and the value of research in rehabilitation sciences in generating knowledge that could contribute to evidence-informed decisions that optimize health and well-being of individuals. A brief historical background of the evolution of rehabilitation research and practice is provided, both globally and within the Filipino context. Currently, a research-practice gap exists and there is a need to evaluate the efficacy of the traditional approaches still being used in contemporary practice. The local professional organizations representing these disciplines need to be more overt in supporting the use of evidence to guide treatment. This article discusses the challenges faced by researchers that hinder the advancement of scholarly work in the disciplines. Each of the professions must continue to advocate for evidence-based practice and encourage the growth of research in their respective fields.

Keywords: *occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech pathology, research, rehabilitation sciences*

Introduction

It is very encouraging to note that the Philippine Journal of Health Research and Development devoted a special issue highlighting research in physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech pathology. This is an opportune time to recognize the contributions of these professions, and their important role in optimizing the health and wellbeing of every Filipino. In this issue, the readership will find the diversity and complexity of research in the growing body of knowledge in rehabilitation sciences, and the push to provide evidence in the practice of these health professions.

There are many examples in the literature of how research in the rehabilitation sciences have resulted in shifts in the standard of care and reimbursement policies in healthcare. Examples of these are studies on the conservative management of selected orthopedic conditions such as low back pain [1], early mobilization of patients who are critically ill [2], occupational therapy in mental health [3], and the management of functional communication, swallowing, cough, and related disorders [4], to name a few.

Like many other health professions, physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), and speech pathology (SP) started in the clinic, with society recognizing the unique contributions of each discipline initially through the work of master clinicians who advocated and practiced specific treatment techniques. Soon after, other colleagues started to learn these “traditional” techniques and applied them in their specific practice areas, oftentimes making a few different changes via trial and error to arrive at their desired outcomes. Each of the professions had developed these patient management approaches before they had the knowledge and ability to use research and evidence to guide their interventions. It was not until much later that these professions started to more objectively assess the evidence behind the things they routinely perform. In the most recent decades, there has been a push to develop assessment and treatment approaches that are truly based on evidence, and this body of knowledge continues to grow.

It is also important to note that the evolution of OT, PT, and SP practice has reflected our then prevailing understanding of

neurophysiology, motor control, and motor learning, so theoretical underpinnings behind the major treatment approaches were at least based on the sound scientific reasoning at that time. Presently, patient/client management models are based on contemporary concepts behind neuroplasticity. The paper published by Kleim and Jones (2008) in the *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* continues to guide rehabilitation clinicians in configuring their treatment approaches [5]. The professions are also in the midst of incorporating scientific breakthroughs in genomics, regenerative medicine, and precision medicine as some of the major drivers of current and future research directions.

Research in the rehabilitation sciences has been noted to have lagged behind other health disciplines, and this problem may be more notable in the Philippine setting. However, there is starting to be a critical mass of PT, OT, and SP professionals who pursued academic, research-based doctorate degrees and have been the major drivers towards increased output in the scholarly work of these particular disciplines. To date, an overwhelming proportion of research in the rehabilitation sciences has been focused on improving patient care examinations and interventions to arrive at better clinical outcomes. The scientific community is now beginning to gather information about the efficacy of many of the traditional interventions being implemented, and a significant proportion of these interventions has been found to not be supported by evidence. In response, the professional organizations have provided position statements to guide their constituents. For example, the Academy of Neurologic Physical Therapy Board of Directors stated that continuing with “approaches that are not supported by the best available evidence runs contrary to the vision set forth by our predecessors and the tenets of evidence-based medicine.” [6] However, the problem is definitely more complex. An important consideration is that rehabilitation research, especially intervention studies, may miss critical aspects of care such as the therapist-client therapeutic relationship that could be contributory to positive outcomes. Those are not easily captured within very controlled research conducted in laboratories. There is also the challenge of lack of valid and reliable outcome measures that can more accurately measure change in patient performance. At any rate, the use of these traditional techniques not supported by evidence is pervasive in Philippine practice. There is certainly a big research-practice gap that needs to be narrowed.

The professional organizations representing these disciplines continue to push for the inclusion of research evidence to guide practice. In its website, the American

Speech-Language and Hearing Association has a resource called “Evidence maps” which is a repository of tools and resources to assist clinicians, researchers, patients, clients, and other stakeholders in making evidence-informed clinical decisions [7]. Within the ASHA website is also a section on evidence-based practice which contains additional information and resources to assist clinicians in making informed decisions on client care. The American Occupational Therapy Association also has an Evidence-Based Practice and Knowledge Translation section on its website [8]. Included in this section are the following: systematic reviews, critically appraised topics, practice guidelines, evidence-informed intervention ideas, and knowledge translation, among others.

The American Physical Therapy Association has a highly comprehensive and curated section devoted to evidence-based practice [9]. The websites of the component sections of the APTA also contain information aimed at guiding clinicians and stakeholders to make evidence-informed decisions including evidence-based examination recommendations according to patient populations and diagnoses and current clinical practice guidelines for a variety of conditions.

Both the APTA and AOTA have adopted Choosing Wisely®, which was initiated by the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) Foundation and is intended to advance the conversation between practitioners and patients about unnecessary medical tests, treatments, and procedures. Both associations have developed their own set of Choosing Wisely® recommendations specific to their disciplines, and can be found here <https://www.choosingwisely.org/societies/american-physical-therapy-association/> and here <https://www.choosingwisely.org/societies/american-occupational-therapy-association-inc/>.

A review of the websites of similar professional organizations in the Philippines show little content on research and evidence-based practice. The Philippine Academy of Occupational Therapy (PAOT), Philippine Physical Therapy Association (PPTA), and Philippine Academy of Speech Pathology (PASP) websites do not have specific areas dedicated to research and evidence-based practice information on their sites. This is not to say that these professional organizations do not value or advocate the use of research but is more emblematic of the need for these professions to be more overt in the use of research evidence to guide treatment.

In the Philippine setting, the push to generate scholarly work in the rehabilitation sciences is confounded by additional

unique circumstances. First, there continues to be a significant movement of OTs, PTs, and SPs leaving the country for better opportunities abroad. For those who decide to stay, they are faced with the challenge of lack of available suitable employment. If ever employment is available, the open positions do not pay enough and/or are basically contractual in nature, with employment as professionals in their respective fields barely sufficient for these individuals to support themselves and their families. This major issue affects the professions in profound ways, from lack of clinicians to treat patient and clients, and lack of qualified individuals to teach future professionals, to lack of stable continuity of membership in the professions, which limit the ability of the disciplines to put forth initiatives to advance their agendas. In this environment where the basic needs for survival are barely met, the need to produce research that advances the professions invariably takes a back seat.

There is also the challenge of the archaic RA 5680: Philippine Physical and Occupational Therapy Law of 1969 that still governs current PT practice. This law needs to change to reflect the contemporary practice of physical therapy in the country, and the complex role of PT as independent, autonomous but collaborative practitioners within the healthcare system.

In addition, structural and institutional challenges slow the growth of research in rehabilitation (and perhaps in healthcare in general) in the country. There are challenges in accessing Institutional Review Boards to provide ethical clearances to proposed studies. Where there are ethics boards, researchers often complain about the slowness of these bodies to review research proposals, or the overly burdensome, multiple, often redundant, not at all integrated paperwork required to achieve the necessary permissions. There is also some confusion regarding the types of studies that can be classified under expedited or exempt reviews. These challenges severely limit the quantity and quality of research endeavors. For example, in cases where research output is embedded within the curricular flow to allow a student to graduate in time with the respective professional degrees, timelines for advancement through the research process is typically tight. Because of the challenges stated above, oftentimes faculty and student researchers avoid clinical intervention or higher level of evidence research outputs and resort to scoping or incomplete or significantly narrowed (and therefore not very generalizable) systematic reviews, or simple survey instruments as research outputs. There is also a lack of funding sources to support more advanced and higher-quality research studies. While accrediting bodies have required the inclusion of research in

OT, PT, and SP curricula, only a handful of universities in the Philippines have been able to publish research articles in peer-reviewed publications. The bottom line is that not only is it simply too difficult and complicated to produce high-quality research in rehabilitation sciences in the Philippines, there is also a lack of overall capacity and capability to engage in activities that eventually produce published research in the disciplines.

There is definitely a need for more research in the professions, and even more so, research that has implications in the context of physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech pathology practice in the Philippines. More work needs to be done to validate the existing examination and treatment tools in the Philippine setting to ensure optimal implementation of these approaches within the local environment.

All these disciplines are relatively newer professions in healthcare in the Philippines. While each discipline is in various stages in its goal of achieving autonomy in terms of practice, all the professions agree that interprofessional, collaborative, and evidence-informed practice will lead to optimal patient outcomes. Each of the professions must continue to advocate for evidence-based practice and to encourage the growth of research in their respective fields.

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