Summary

Communication is the underpinning of every relationship. In the case of physician referral for physiotherapy, optimal communication between physiotherapists and physicians is important for the patient’s experience of being cared for by a coordinated health care team.

How can physiotherapists optimize written communication with physicians? **Optimize** means “make the best or most effective use of a situation, opportunity or resource” [google.ca].

The purpose of this investigation is to identify concrete information for physiotherapists about what British Columbia physicians value in a written progress note, so that each practitioner can consider if they are addressing those needs in the context of their own clinical practice.

Methods

**Literature Search and Environmental Scan**

The literature review was conducted during January and February 2017, and was based on a web-based search that utilized the following search engines: UBC Library Search Engine: [http://www.library.ubc.ca](http://www.library.ubc.ca), Free Medical Journals: [http://www.freemedicaljournals.com](http://www.freemedicaljournals.com), Google: [https://www.google.ca](https://www.google.ca) and Google Scholar: [https://scholar.google.ca](https://scholar.google.ca)

Keywords and phrases used included:

- guidelines for written communication with physicians.
- communication between physicians and physical therapists
- physiotherapist and physician communication

There is a small body of literature dealing specifically with PT/Physician communication mainly from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Themes were noted from both the PT and the physician perspective. Results from the physician perspective are included in this summary.
• Physicians preferred short, succinct reports (bullet-point is fine), confirmation of the appropriateness of the referral and whether physiotherapy was a suitable treatment option.  
• Physicians valued confirmation of a working diagnosis.  
• Receipt of physiotherapy reports influenced future referral behaviour.  
• There are individual preferences among physicians regarding communication. This is a challenging area for new to practice physiotherapists and is an area for support and mentorship.  
• Physicians have differing background knowledge levels and experience of physiotherapy.  
Receipt of written and verbal communication and even working in the same facility did not always translate to a better understanding of what physiotherapists do.  

Survey

A survey was developed and sent to approximately 3000 BC Family Physicians. 118 responses were received over a 2 ½ week period. Those who were not practising family physicians were excluded. The survey was contained to clinical situations that did not involve an auto insurance or workplace injury claim. Information was collated from 97 eligible responders with 88 completed surveys.

Questions related to the preferred timing, format and content of written notes. We sought general comments about what could be improved in physiotherapist/physician communication, from the physician perspective.

Results

Timing of Reports
• 68% of responders rated a written plan at the start of treatment as important or most important
• 84% did so for a written report at the end of treatment
• Unsurprisingly, 96% valued a report if there was a problem or concern
• 72% rated a phone call as important or most important if there was a concern
• 89% would spend 2 minutes or less reading a progress note

Content and Format of Reports
Based on the mean scores the most useful content areas were
• Assessment findings
• Progress of the patient toward treatment goals
• Whether or not treatment goals were being met as expected
• Discharge plan and post discharge recommendations, recommendations for further investigation or intervention
Physicians were overall neutral about the usefulness of information about number or duration of treatment and reporting on changes noted in standardized outcome measures. The majority, 66% preferred a paper written report versus a report by secure email.

Additional Physician Comments

- Keep reports brief and concise, point form is fine
- Typed reports are preferred
- Please notify with concerns or red flags
- Comment on progress with function (e.g. ADL, sports, work)
- Note of the patient’s engagement with treatment is useful (objective information, taking care not to be judgemental)
- Direct communication is appreciated rather than asking the patient to relay information, particularly when requesting imaging or a specialist referral.
- Communication from the physiotherapist is appreciated and valued

Reference List


8. file:///H:/Communications/Effective%20Communications%20Presentation/Patient%20satisfaction%20with%20musculoskeletal%20physiotherapy%20care%20in%20Australia%20an%20international%20comparison.htm Accessed February 21, 2017
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