

Advancing care in Pakistan: The role of physical therapy in dementia

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Sir,

Dementia is a broad term for declining cognitive skills that impact daily activities. It encompasses memory, reasoning, and physical limitations like movement problems and weakness of muscles. This decline can significantly reduce a person's quality of life and ability to function safely. Terms such as "major neurocognitive disorder" and "mild cognitive disorder" are also used for dementia. WHO defines dementia as "a term for several diseases that affect memory, thinking, and the ability to perform daily activities."⁽¹⁾

Dementia, characterized by amyloid-beta plaque and neurofibrillary mass formation, leads to cognitive and physical decline. Despite the potential of physical therapy to enhance balance, strength, and reduce fall risk in these patients, a prevalent misconception of "no rehabilitation potential" often limits their access to therapy in acute care settings. Comprehensive management of dementia requires a holistic approach including medical treatment and rehabilitation to optimize patient outcomes.⁽²⁾

In Pakistan, often times sign and symptoms associated with dementia is seen as a part of normal aging process. Memory loss is closely associated with both dementia and old age, but there are significant differences as the memory loss in dementia does not follow the same patterns as that of old age and this causes a delay in diagnosis. Due to this, early diagnosis and care for these patients is often delayed.⁽³⁾ A study in 2024 concluded that cognitive rehabilitation shows promising results in reducing cognitive deficits and improving quality of life and by including these methods in person centric individualized training programs, independence and quality of life can be

enhanced.⁽⁴⁾ Another study conducted in 2021 stated that there are potential benefits of incorporating physical rehabilitation to improve the physical aspects of the patient.⁽⁵⁾

A study conducted in 2021 aimed to explore the level of dementia research and services provided to these patients in Pakistan highlighted that there is a lack of dementia awareness in the Pakistan population. Tailored training programs for physiotherapists should be developed, emphasizing the importance of referrals to physiotherapy departments. Evidence suggests that Physical therapists in Pakistan display a positive attitude towards the elderly keeping in mind the ageism facts. However, this doesn't necessarily correlate with their knowledge of dementia and their attitude towards patients with dementia.⁽⁶⁾

Dementia requires care and treatment from a multi-disciplinary team that includes physicians, specialized nursing care, physical therapists, and occupational therapists. Targeted training programs for health care workers of multidisciplinary team, along with increased awareness campaigns for both healthcare professionals and the public, are important steps. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of dementia and the crucial role of physical therapy within a multidisciplinary care team, we can optimize the quality of life for individuals living with dementia in Pakistan.

Keywords: Awareness, Dementia, Physical therapy, Quality of life, Rehabilitation.

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