

A Qualitative Study of Approaches Used by Physiotherapists to Educate Patients with Chronic Low Back Pain

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Abstract : The aim of this study was to investigate the approaches used by physiotherapists in the education of patients with chronic low back pain (cLBP) and the rationale that underpins their choice of approach. Therapeutic patient education (TPE) is considered to be an important aspect of modern physiotherapy practice, as it helps patients achieve better self-management and a better understanding of their problem. Previous studies have explored this subject, but the reasoning behind the choices physiotherapists make as educators has not been widely explored, thus making it difficult to understand areas that could be addressed in order to improve the application of TPE. A qualitative study design, guided by a constructivist epistemology was used in this research project. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 7 physiotherapists. Inductive coding and thematic analysis were used, which allowed key themes to emerge. Data analysis revealed two overarching themes: 1) patient-centred versus therapist-centred educational approaches, and 2) behaviourist versus constructivist educational approaches. Physiotherapists appear to use a patient-centred-approach when they explore patients' beliefs about cLBP and treatment expectations. However, treatment planning and goal-setting were guided by a therapist-centred approach, as physiotherapists appear to take on the role of the instructor/expert, whereas patients were viewed as students. Using a constructivist approach, physiotherapists aimed to provide guidance to patients by combining their professional knowledge with the patients' individual knowledge, to help the patient better understand their problem, reflect upon it and find a possible solution. However, educating patients about scientific facts concerning cLBP followed a behaviourist approach, as an instructor/student relationship was observed and the learning content was predetermined and transmitted in a one-way manner. The results of this study suggest that a lack of consistency appears to exist in the educational approaches used by physiotherapists. Although patient-centeredness and constructivism appear to be the aims set by physiotherapists in order to optimise the education they provide, a student-teacher relationship appears to dominate when it comes to goal-setting and delivering scientific information.

Keywords : chronic low back pain, educational approaches, health education, patient education

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