
UNDERSTANDING MUSCULOSKELETAL PHYSIOTHERAPY PRACTICE IN AOTEAROA: AN EXPLORATION OF MUSCULOSKELETAL PHYSIOTHERAPISTS' PERSPECTIVES OF PRACTICE

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Introduction: A contemporary musculoskeletal physiotherapy curriculum taught in Aotearoa New Zealand (AoNZ) must be responsive to the unique conditions shaping our society. However, little is known about the unique experience of becoming and being a musculoskeletal physiotherapist in AoNZ and the bespoke conditions that influence this. What does it mean to be a musculoskeletal physiotherapist in AoNZ? An inquiry into contemporary perspectives and the modern physiotherapy landscape in AoNZ is needed to inform the newest generation of physiotherapists and guide future curriculum development.

Aim: We aimed to (1) understand what it means to be a musculoskeletal physiotherapist in AoNZ, (2) explore musculoskeletal physiotherapists' perspectives of their physiotherapy practice, and (3) identify potential changes that could improve musculoskeletal physiotherapy curriculum design and implementation.

Methods: A diverse group of 15 musculoskeletal physiotherapists practising in AoNZ were individually interviewed. A qualitative Interpretive Descriptive approach alongside a reflexive thematic analysis framework was utilised. Data were coded and grouped independently, with provisional theme names and definitions constructed. The groupings and theme structure were discussed within the research team before being finalised.

Results: Four themes were generated. Theme 1, "Musculoskeletal physiotherapy is much more", described a narrow public view of musculoskeletal physiotherapy, as participants thought they had more to offer than "... the sports physio on TV". In Theme 2, "Evidence versus (patient) expectations", participants shared tensions between patient expectations and best practice: "Are we providing healthcare or hospitality?". Theme 3, "Being conflicted", included or referred to professional conflicts primarily shaped by bespoke AoNZ conditions, including ACC/funding, multi-culturalism, and cost versus quality. Theme 4, "My navigator", explored the need for patient support to navigate the health system, but also mentorship and career progression within the profession itself.

Conclusion: Our participants highlighted external (narrow public view and conflicting expectations) and internal (AoNZ-specific contexts and mentorship) conflicts that shaped their clinical practice. Within this study, challenges identified by the participants

centred around the perception of physiotherapy, balancing evidence and expectation, maintaining professional identity, and the need for advocacy. More so, it became apparent from this research the need to define musculoskeletal physiotherapy and improve awareness of our roles. Our participants provided valuable insights into contemporary musculoskeletal physiotherapy practice and education development in AoNZ.

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