The neglect of physiotherapy skills in aged care

A survey by Hobbs et al (2006) found that undergraduate physiotherapy students had positive attitudes towards older people, both at the start and finish of training, which is a pleasing result. However, their knowledge about older people, revealed by the Facts on Ageing Quiz 1, was initially poor, with a mean of 43.6% (correct response), and improved to only 52% at the point of graduating. As stated by Hobbs et al (2006), this is a major concern for the profession. The survey response may also reflect more widespread neglect of aged care in physiotherapy practice. In my view there are multiple factors that contribute to this neglect: undergraduate education, postgraduate coursework, and the workplace.

Undergraduate student clinical placements in aged care settings tend to be confined to 2nd year ‘general experience’ placements or to 4th year electives. Hobbs et al (2006) reported that the University of Sydney undergraduate program had no stand alone unit of study dedicated to older people and the situation is similar in other states. Undergraduate training requires establishment of core knowledge and skills in clinical practice and it is not possible to cover every specialty in depth, although the clinical areas of musculoskeletal, cardiopulmonary, and neurology practice are well represented in undergraduate education.

Aged care is an area of practice that requires all of the above essential foundation skills. But as aged care is generalist in scope, it is not perceived to be a ‘specialty area’ although aged care physiotherapy practice also requires advanced knowledge and skills in:

- Assessment and treatment in aged care and rehabilitation
- Physiology of ageing applied to fitness, rehabilitation, and falls prevention
- Complex and chronic conditions
- Cognitive and mental health issues and social context
- Pain science
- Palliative care.

Jull and O’Sullivan (2006) highlighted the importance of postgraduate clinical training and specialisation. A sample of five universities in Australia reveals that there is only one postgraduate physiotherapy coursework degree offered specifically in gerontology (University of Queensland.) Several universities offer flexibility and external coursework, with students able to combine subjects of study from more than one institution. In practice, this is not a simple process. Aged care is an area of study that requires a combination of core generic subjects (eg, evidence-based practice and research skills), clinical specialty skills, and access to a broad range of generic subjects.

Aged care settings include nongovernment organisations, domiciliary care services, acute, and subacute care. Common features of aged care settings include isolated staff, minimal structures of professional support and supervision, and workplace professional development activities dominated by generic skill needs. The APA gerontology special interest group provides the most significant forum for networking and professional development in aged care in Australia.

In conclusion, aged care practice lacks high priority in undergraduate physiotherapy education and is not considered an area of priority in most postgraduate courses. Further, inherent features in many aged care workplaces contribute to systemic neglect of physiotherapy skills. The challenge of promoting healthy ageing, independence, and quality of life is interesting and rewarding. Aged care is a specialist area of physiotherapy practice that must not be under-valued or neglected.

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References
