



Aging & Chronic Diseases

Recreational physiotherapy in long-term care institutions

What are the residents' perceptions regarding recreational physiotherapy?

Author : Gregory Guyot

Living in institutions – especially long-term care institutions (LTCIs) – may be limiting for older adults since their context is not often in favour of physical activity or participation in social and daily activities. This may directly impact physical and mental health by leading to further sedentarity and disabilities.

Promoting physical activity in LTCIs is therefore essential. On the other hand, it is a real challenge for physiotherapists taking care of older residents. Previous studies highlighted that physical activity as part of recreational physiotherapy can provide both physical and psychological benefits for older people in a long-term care context: less pain, less falls, better daily functioning, improved motivation and social interaction. However, some barriers may limit these positive effects, either institutional (structural issues such as lack of space) or

behavioural (resident issues).

It seems necessary to fully understand older peoples' perceptions of recreational physiotherapy in LTCIs: knowing their feelings and attitudes about physical activity may help physiotherapists to better adapt their work while including residents' feedback in their care strategies. The aim of the present qualitative study was to assess the perceptions and experiences of older adults regarding recreational physiotherapy in LTCIs. It was found that they experienced physical, psychological and social benefits.

In this study, a qualitative descriptive approach was used to further understand the experience and feelings of older people living in institutions about recreational physiotherapy. Nine participants met the inclusion criteria and were selected among 31 residents from two long-term care institutions in Brazil attending recreational activities in their care routines for more than once a week.

Recreational physiotherapy was described as a multicomponent exercise programme provided to a group of residents in order to 1) increase the level of physical activity, 2) improve their motor and functional skills (e.g., strength, flexibility and balance) and 3) develop social relationships. This involved background music and a few materials (e.g., balls, hula hoops, foam pool noodles). The programme was performed once a day during 45 to 60 minutes, three to five times a week. Exercises were supervised by instructors (physical activity students) who were requested to adapt each exercise to the participant's needs and abilities, as the programme was open to all residents.

Demographic data were collected along with scores on the Mini-mental state examination (MMSE), Timed up and go-test (TUG) and Barthel index. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by a researcher (average duration: 30 minutes), based on guiding questions that still enabled free and additional expression by the participants. Audio recordings were made so that each word, silence, pause or emotion was recorded and assessed. A transcription was carried out anonymously, and another researcher analysed the video footage of participants (in common areas) attending a recreational physiotherapy session to assess their behaviours. A content analysis was then performed (reading, sorting, defining and classifying into meaningful units and defining themes).

Participants' perceptions of recreational physiotherapy can be summarised as follows :

- "Activity for myself": older people described their physical feelings when performing the programme, either positively ("you get better") or negatively ("there is nothing different in doing it"). Exercises were associated with health problems and complaints which either encourage or restrain physiotherapy (practicing exercise to get better). Globally, activity implied both physical and emotional well-being while being a time of personal distraction.



- “Activity with others”: the fact that recreational physiotherapy took place in group sessions brought interaction between residents, made activities even more dynamic and developed a spirit of care as participants showed concern with performance and efforts of others.
- “Activity itself”: participants highlighted the positive effects of physical activity performed in group, either physically (motor function), emotionally (leisure, well-being) and socially (relationship). They particularly appreciated group exercises for their stimulation and confirmed that a one-hour session is fine to fully benefit from recreational physiotherapy while not feeling too tired. Finally, older people insisted on the importance of the relationship with the therapist and his/ her ability to adapt and personalise the programme to each participant’s specificity.

The authors concluded that practicing physical exercises on a regular basis as part of recreational physiotherapy for older people living in LTCIs seems to bring physical and emotional well-being while it also strengthens social bounds.

Expert opinion

The present study highlights the fact that physical activity can be perceived either as positive (a way to feel good and heal) or negative (a barrier due to preexisting pain or incapacity) for older people in institutions.

Encouraging physical activity for this population is always a challenge, considering older peoples' singularities and characteristics. This study reminds us that proposing pleasant and multicomponent activities matching older peoples' needs, adapting exercises to their own physical and cognitive capabilities, assisting them while performing exercises and developing empathy with therapists are tools to improve the level of physical activity and the related benefits for older residents in LTCIs.

Performing activities within a group is also a key element in providing physiotherapy for LTCIs residents, as it encourages physical activity and stimulates a shared and common experience with partners. This helps them feel alive with a sense of togetherness, while improving self-confidence.

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