Physiotherapy and Physiotherapists in Albania - What Should We Do?

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Abstract: In Albania physiotherapy is in its beginnings but is growing rapidly. The growth of physiotherapy is accompanied by a number of problems. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the main problems and to make some proposals for improving the situation. In our research we have used data from different sources and personal contacts. In Albania there is an Association of Physiotherapists (AAP) which is member of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT). Physiotherapists are members of the Nursing Order of Albania (NOA). From our research results that the main problems of physiotherapy and of physiotherapists are: “Anonymity” of physiotherapy professionals; Conditions of work; lack of control over the activities of clinics; Lack of professionalism and low quality treatments; Lack of communication; and unprofessional behavior. The main idea of our proposals and conclusions is that the burden of responsibility and for the problem solving is over the shoulders of physiotherapy professionals.

Keywords: Physiotherapy, Albania, conditions of work, professionalism, unprofessional behavior, health and safety legislation.

1. Introduction

In many countries around the world, and in particular in the developed countries, physiotherapy is a medical affirmation with results and ever-growing expectations from the patients. In Albania physiotherapy has known a rapid development mainly in recent years, but this growth is accompanied by its problems. Currently, physiotherapy and physiotherapists present a poor image among medical sciences and health professionals. It is essential that this image must be changed because otherwise the physiotherapy and its professionals are seriously jeopardized. The purpose of this publication is to highlight the main problems and to make some proposals for improving the situation or/and resolving them.

Physiotherapy is new and little known in Albania. The first university physiotherapy program opened in 2006 at the “Faculty of Nursing” in Tirana by a group of Belgian professors [1]. Current data regarding this profession and its professionals are missing. There are no data on the number of jobs available as well as about the number of physiotherapists in the health system, in the state or private sector. Physiotherapists in private sector practice a number of techniques such as manual techniques, kinesiotherapy, ultrasound therapy, and so on. While in hospitals physiotherapists are involved mainly in the Departments of Traumatology, Cardiology and Neurology. Physiotherapists also exercise their profession in institutions for people with disabilities, in beauty centers, mainly in massages, in sports clubs and gyms.

In 2012 is born the Albanian Association of Physiotherapists (AAP)[2], a member of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) [3] from 2015. From the website of WCPT results that in the Albanian Association of Physiotherapists in 2017 there are 126 members [4].

Nowadays in Tirana, the Albanian capital city with about 1 million inhabitants, there are over 200 physiotherapy clinics/studios. Many of these exercises belong to professionals from neighboring countries. Physiotherapists are part of the Nursing Order of Albania (NOA) and currently there are about 200 licensed professionals [5]. Physiotherapists in Albania are rewarded equally as nurses [6].

Works about problems of physiotherapy as a profession or about physiotherapists as professionals in Albania are totally absent. This paper seems to be the first. Research in physiotherapy seems to be in its beginnings in Albania. There are just a few of studies in different areas of applications of physiotherapy [7-12]. They are generally completed at the most important hospitals and university hospital centers. There are been organized few national conferences from the AAP, NOA, Order of Pharmacists of Albania [42] and the different state and private universities where mainly university teaching members present their works.

Physiotherapists know that the physiotherapy profession is an important profession for the community and in many cases significantly improves
the lives of the patients. Unfortunately many doctors and patients who could benefit from physiotherapy services are unaware of the potential benefits or are disappointed with the results. This causes us to have a low level of knowledge of this profession and creates a bad image for his professionals. A serious effect of this condition is also a kind of reluctance by the part of the doctors to accept these professionals as qualified health professionals. If these problems are not addressed properly and urgently then physiotherapy professionals will be increasingly marginalized and with no prospects for the future.

In this paper we like to highlight, and very briefly discuss, a number of issues that exist in relation to physiotherapists and their profession. Then using the problems as an impetus we will suggest possible ways for the gradual improvement of the situation.

We must first say that it is extremely difficult to find official data about physiotherapy and its professionals in Albania. But even when any data is found, they are very scarce or do not present the reality or give such a poor image of this reality that it comes to think that it would be better not to be.

However, in dealing with these problems we are based on several sources. First, we will rely on the data provided by the websites of the Albanian Association of Physiotherapists (AAP) [2], of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) [4], and of the Nursing Order of Albania (NOA) [13], etc. Then we used the data from the works of physiotherapists or other professionals interested in the field of physiotherapy and in the end the data from our studies with physiotherapy students at Luigi Gurakuqi University in Shkodra [14-15] as well our contacts with physiotherapists and other health professionals.

2. “Anonymity” of physiotherapy professionals

In the Albanian Association of Physiotherapists [2], according to data from the World Confederation for Physical Therapy [4], there are 126 members.

Physiotherapy teaching in Albanian university system has about 10 years of activity. Currently in Albania there are 8 universities, 4 private [16-19] and 4 state universities [20-23] from which every year are graduated many students in bachelor [24] and master [25-26] in physiotherapy. On the other hand, in Albania there are licensed about 200 physiotherapists. But where are the other professionals? We must remember that only in Tirana there are about 200 physiotherapy private clinics/studios. There are also clinics and physiotherapy studios in other cities. As well some other professionals are employed in state sector. It is clear that there are many professionals in “anonymity”. In this situation would be interesting to understand what the newly graduated bachelor students want to do, too. There are two possibilities for them: to start looking for work and / or to continue studying further. In a study that we have conducted with physiotherapy students, at the graduation threshold at the University of Shkodra, it turns out that they are well acquainted with the foreign languages, including professional English. They evaluate themselves prepared to start the work, with the potential to participate in research and 92% of them want to continue their studies. The study shows that 60% of students want to look for jobs only abroad, 20% abroad and in Albania, and just 20% only in Albania [14]. In a word, potentially 80% of graduating students in Physiotherapy at the University of Shkodra want to emigrate. In addition, 92% of the students think that in Albania it is difficult to find job as a physiotherapist, while in Europe for 54% of them it is not difficult [14]. It is clear that there a large migration trend but this is not sufficient to justify the very small number of licensed physiotherapists compared to the number of physiotherapy services in the territory.

3. Conditions of work

Currently in Albania there are approved a number of laws regarding health and safety at work regarding the health professions and professionals [27-38], for the Health Service at Work [39], as well as for National Strategy and Policies for Health and Safety at Work [40-41]. Many of them are been updated and improved in the following years after the first publication. But there is a noticeable discrepancy over their implementation and completion with their applicable technical guidelines; the guidelines are missing. This is even more pronounced in the field of physiotherapy.

A study shows that the perception of the students for the prestige of their profession is quite high. It also appears that students have clear objectives for the future. Students enter physiotherapy studies with an expected level of work and success, economic advantage, professional prestige, and most of them aimed at a private practice [15]. They feel prepared to start to work in a number of areas of their profession. Students also manage to identify shortages and discrepancies between knowledge skills and the future work reality. Failure to meet the expectations of their professional skills with the working conditions may lead to emigration as well as in psychological and physical symptoms associated with the reduction of patient care quality, dissatisfaction with the profession, and burnout of physiotherapists, too.
4. Lack of control over the activities of private clinics/studios

From a first observation, there are currently over 200 private physiotherapy clinics [5] in Tirana, where Albanian physiotherapists exercise their profession. These clinics, in general, are owned by foreigners such as Turks, Italians, Macedonians, etc. It is not possible to understand how many Albanian physiotherapists exercise their profession in these clinics. If we talk about other cities, the situation is even more complicated and there is no reference, except for any website, about the number and activity of physiotherapy private clinics/studios and the number of employed professionals. It has not been possible to understand what happens to physiotherapy and its professionals in these territories of the country. It should be noted that in a study conducted by us with physiotherapy students on the threshold of their Bachelor degree at the University of Shkodra, it turns out that 50% of students prefer to work in private exercises and 83% of students think that after 5 years they will have their proper private practice [14]. So, potentially the work in private clinics / studios is the most important element of the job prospects for future physiotherapists. It can also be assumed that the number of private exercises will increase, too.

5. Lack of professionalism and low quality treatments

As the president of the AAP says [5], in physiotherapy clinics often work not just unlicensed but also totally unqualified people performing treatments whose results, in the best case, are doubtful. So, between the factors that reduce the quality of physiotherapy treatments, in addition to workload and lack of time, there are also those directly related to the professionalism of people treating the patients. This results in: Low level of care and attention to the patient and his problems; The beginning of treatments without a pre-regimen or only with superficial assessments of the patient's problems which results in inappropriate and ineffective treatments; No evaluation of the results after the end of the treatment session or after a number of treatments/cure; Generally, treatment and outcome data are scarce, superficial or completely absent, which is transformed into a large peg in the case of changing of professionals.

6. Lack of communication

Communication is a very broad term and involves different work plans of the physiotherapist. It begins with the communication between the physiotherapist and the patient to continue with the communication between the physiotherapists and finally, what is often the most neglected element of the physiotherapist communication, with the communication between the physiotherapist and the other health professionals. At present, for all these plans there are big deficiencies. All of these communication gaps arise for various reasons. But let's face it. Every time a patient has to go for treatment in other professionals, he should be accompanied by written reports about the performed treatments and results achieved, but the lack of treatment records, as mentioned above, lead to the lack of communication between peers and other health professionals; Job results are often doubtful and not objectively evaluated. This is even worsened from the decisions to continue with the treatments instead of recommending the patient to another professional; The treatments, generally, are carried out by single people and cooperation in teams is almost unknown; Communication with colleagues is very rare despite the many existing opportunities.

7. Unprofessional behavior

The unprofessional behavior is another problem between physiotherapy professionals. Here we want to mention just a few from the most important ones in this regard: Some physiotherapists present themselves as specialists in a given field while not having the proper level of training in that field, so, damaging the patient, the relationships with other professionals as well as the field of application itself; In some clinics happens that the treatments are done by unqualified people, especially this is more pronounced in the use of equipment without the presence of a professional.

8. Some proposals and conclusions

In general, the work about data recording for physiotherapy and physiotherapists should be improved.

Organizations and professional associations of physiotherapists should increase their activity and they must present it better.

State bodies, together with professional organizations, should increase their work to at least reduce the “anonymity”.

Professionals need to know better and reflect on their work legislation, and health and safety at work legislation.

Cooperation between organizations and professional associations with state bodies needs to increase for a better control of the activities of private clinics and studios.

Professionals themselves should eliminate the lack of professionalism and the control bodies along with professional organizations should increase their control activity.
Physiotherapists should find the ways to increase the communication between them and the other health professionals.

The unprofessional behavior must be eliminated. In conclusion, we can say that if we want to improve the physiotherapist's image we must first examine ourselves critically and honestly, and then implement constructive changes where they are needed. Doing so, it will be advantageous for both professionals and our profession. Then, we can set new goals and higher standards for the future. So, we can say that the main burden of responsibility and for the problem solving for physiotherapy as a profession as well as for physiotherapists as professionals it is only above our shoulders.

9. Acknowledgements

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10. References

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