

## LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Editor,

### **Investing in Community-based Physiotherapy**

Community-based physiotherapy is a less known and less pursued specialisation in physiotherapy (Rajan, 2013). This might be due to various reasons; to name a few, the lack of interest among physiotherapists to work in the communities, paucity of information on community-based physiotherapy, complex methods required to measure a community and reduced awareness about community health problems among physiotherapists (Rajan, 2012). Recently, while surfing through a list of international conferences to be held in India, it was exciting to find a conference which had a sub-theme in physiotherapy. At the same time, it was disappointing to note that submissions were encouraged in all other specialisations except community-based physiotherapy. The omission points strongly to the lack of awareness among academic physiotherapists about the importance of this specialisation. Nevertheless, community-based physiotherapy can be perceived as an important cog in the wheel of the healthcare system, which could enhance performance, particularly in resource-constrained countries like India.

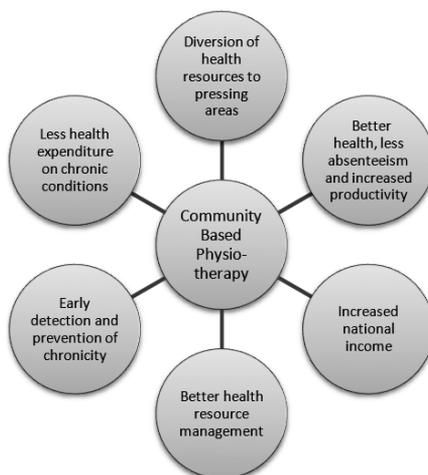
The benefits of community-based physiotherapy can be broadly classified into 2 categories: economic and non-economic. Economic benefits are those benefits that can be quantified, usually in monetary terms, while non-economic benefits are less tangible and are usually difficult to express in quantitative terms. While economic benefits are by and large important for the policy-maker, non-economic benefits, which have a direct influence on the health of communities, are more useful to the clinical physiotherapist. The economic benefits of community-based physiotherapy are set out in Figure 1. However, it is always best to consider economic and non-economic benefits together, as both have an influence on the health of communities in general.

The major economic benefit of community-based physiotherapy is that it averts the chronicity of a health condition and identifies health issues at an early stage. Early identification of health issues makes the treatment easier and less of an economic burden. Healthcare expenditure tends to increase as the number of chronic conditions increase (Machlin and Soni, 2013). As per the report of the National Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion,

United States (2009), more than 75% of the total health expenditure is on the management of chronic conditions, and “chronic conditions are more costly to society”. “The power of prevention” through community interventions was strongly emphasised in this report. It was also noted that investing in community health programmes would save healthcare expenses significantly in the long run. In India, specifically, it has been found that there is considerable out-of-pocket expenditure on preventable community health issues like heart disease. As a result, the economic disparity between the rich and the poor is increasing, leading to the growth of a further number of poor communities (Bhojani et al, 2012; Daivadanam et al, 2012).

Another economic benefit derived from community-based physiotherapy is better health for people in the employable age group, resulting in increased productivity and greater economic gains for the country. There is less absenteeism at work and no reduction in productivity due to chronic health conditions (Babu et al, 2002). Chronic diseases can be considered as “an economic burden to the community”. Thus, the use of community-based physiotherapy to identify health problems, especially among those in the “productive” age group, can indirectly aid in income generation in the country. It has also been seen that community interventions among school-going children promote better health and reduce absenteeism at school (Limerick Health Promotion, 2008). Children are the adults of the future, and community interventions for school children could help to build a healthier and more productive adult workforce.

**Figure 1: The Economic Benefits of Community-based Physiotherapy**



Lastly, by treating health conditions at the initial stage and preventing chronicity, health expenditure can be allocated to other areas that require urgent attention. Better management of a country's health resources would lead to increased efficiency with less investment and more positive outcomes. In conclusion, it can be said that community-based physiotherapy could act as an important component in the public health system by identifying and averting chronic health conditions in needy communities. This would not only improve overall health but also help in better management of health finances.

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