

LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Editor,

The Application of Focus Group Discussions and Interviews in Community Physiotherapy

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with participants have been commonly used in community settings in remote or rural areas. In large-scale community projects, these tools of research help to understand health issues such as smoking, mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, dengue control, nutrition regulation, sexual health, Parkinson's disease, childhood obesity, and cancer.

Though there is evidence that focus group discussions and in-depth interviews have been extensively used with much success in medical research, their application in the field of community physiotherapy is seldom studied (Sim and Snell, 1996). In a recent study on stroke survivors in Zambia (Mapulanga et al, 2014), 50 households in the Livingstone district were included in focus group discussions to understand the socio-economic burden of the disease at the individual, family and community levels. The analyses of the data collected from these discussions helped to highlight the burden created by the disease at different levels. A review paper by Smith et al (2009) suggested the novel method of using telephone-based group discussions in physiotherapy. The authors emphasised the benefits of this method in terms of greater coverage area, increased participation and handling of sensitive issues. In another study that used focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and participant observations in a semi-urban hospital in Kenya (Gona et al, 2013), the need for cost-effective community physiotherapy for management of chronic aches and pains in low-resource settings was realised. In India, a series of focus group discussions were conducted with slum women and children by Rajan and Koti (2013). These discussions helped to understand the prevalent musculoskeletal health issues in this cohort; thereafter, community physiotherapy was recommended for these problems. In an earlier study by Rajan (2012), focus group discussions were used to look into the lacunae in the community physiotherapy system in western India. While focus group discussions and interviews have proved to be effective in understanding community physiotherapy issues, studies on the subject are few.

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews are cost-effective qualitative methods of research (Fok-Han and Ratnapalan, 2009). This is one of the major advantages of using these tools in community physiotherapy, which in itself can be considered a cost-effective tool of rehabilitation (Rajan, 2014a & 2014b). In addition, during discussions there is detailed sharing of information among/between participants, which might be missing in other forms of data collection like surveys (Mansell et al, 2004). However, one of the important drawbacks is that the quality of the data collected depends tremendously on the skill of the leader. Appropriate and relevant data can only be collected if the leader is trained and is able to focus on the issue at hand (Fok-Han and Ratnapalan, 2009).

In conclusion, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews seem to show promise as tools for data collection in community physiotherapy. However, the number of studies is insufficient to substantiate this. Their efficacy could be assessed only if they are optimally used for research purposes.

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