



# “Physiotherapy outpatient’s chronic pain management ..... realizing the potential”



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Physiotherapy outpatient services are well placed to provide services to people with chronic pain. This study explores the experiences and perceptions of outpatient physiotherapists who work with people with chronic pain.

### **Background:**

In September 2010 the International Association for the Study of Pain stated in the declaration of Montreal:

“...access to pain management is a fundamental human right’ and a “person in pain has a right to assessment and treatment by an appropriately educated and trained interdisciplinary team at all levels of care”.

Evidence-based chronic pain management is an innovative practice providing tools for outpatient physiotherapists to integrate and transform daily practice.

### **Study Design and Methods:**

Phenomenological inquiry via direct contact was used to explore the lived experiences of outpatient physiotherapists. Fourteen physiotherapists from rural, remote and regional physiotherapy outpatient departments were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed manually. Thematic analysis elicited the barriers physiotherapists have to successful engagement with people with chronic pain.

### **Results:**

The main themes were: outpatient services have been designed for quick turnaround and addressing acute conditions; physiotherapy training has up until now focused on biomedical and biomechanical assessment processes, physiotherapists feel rewarded for relief of symptoms, working with people with chronic pain is difficult, dealing with emotional distress is uncomfortable, and poor access to new information and training due to geographical and professional isolation prevents new practices from gaining traction.

### **Discussion:**

Physiotherapists often lack knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of chronic pain management. The lack of knowledge of and use of a biopsychosocial assessment and identification process means people with chronic pain are managed as if they have acute pain. These issues create barriers to full engagement and management by outpatient physiotherapists of people with chronic pain. Physiotherapists need opportunities to experience chronic pain management in action before they adopt the new forms of thinking and practice. The current lack of investment in physiotherapy outpatients in evidence-based chronic pain management prevents successful engagement. Without the empowerment of outpatient physiotherapists to alter their practices people with chronic pain do not get the outcomes now known to be possible.

### **Conclusion:**

Physiotherapists can work successfully with people with chronic pain when they have integrated evidence-based chronic pain management knowledge, interventions and approaches into their clinical decision-making and embed these into day to day practice.

*For the full report on this project visit our website, follow the link to the Rural Research Capacity Building Program and click on ‘view completed projects’*

Shelley is a physiotherapist currently working in physiotherapy outpatients and transition care at Ballina Community Health. Shelley has an interest in chronic pain management going back 15 years. Her research has enabled her to combine both chronic pain management and physiotherapy outpatients to see what is happening in rural and regional services.



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