Perspectives of Physical Therapy Students’ Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities

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Abstract
Attitudes of healthcare professionals towards individuals with disabilities are inextricably linked to quality of care and there is a notable lack of research conducted on this topic. The aims of this research were to assess the professional and personal attitudes of Northeastern physical therapy students towards people with disabilities. The Physical Therapy students were recruited via email for an online survey consisting of the Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities (MAS), a modified Disability Attitudes in Health Care Scale (DAHC) and a demographic assessment. Survey tools used have good psychometric properties; however, two surveys may have led to subject fatigue. Review by peers may have led participants to portray attitudes they feel are more favorable. Results of both surveys found that Northeastern Physical Therapy students held more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than previously studied health professionals. It is our hope that this research will enrich the literature with a greater understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of physical therapy professionals toward individuals with disabilities and lead to further investigation.

Introduction
Current evidence shows that health professionals, including physical therapists, may provide less than optimal interventions, or withhold certain treatments, and referrals from people with disabilities. Negative attitudes may lead to inferior care, which will ultimately result in worse health outcomes. There has been little published research regarding this topic, suggesting a need for our investigation into contemporary attitudes among professionals in the allied health professions. The findings would also be helpful to entry level professional education programs to foster curricular adjustments and changes as needed.

Methods
Students in the 3rd Professional Year of the Physical Therapy Program at Northeastern were invited to participate in the survey. Students were targeted via email addresses obtained through email Listservs provided by the academic institution. The link to the survey was contained within the email. Upon completion of the survey, students were entered into a raffle for a $50 gift card for the Northeastern bookstore. Upon collection of all research data from the surveys of both groups of participants, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

Results
Data from the two survey tools were analyzed separately. Comparisons were made within the cohort and to the findings presented in previous research. For the MAS, the more negative the score, the more positive the attitude toward people with disabilities. NUP'T students held much more positive attitudes than the Israeli students originally studied with using the MAS. This data correlates with our first hypothesis that American students would hold more positive views than international students. Our second hypothesis held that females would hold more positive attitudes than males, but the null hypothesis was actually supported by our data. This may have been due to a much larger sample of females versus males (31 to 7). For the DAHC, Northeastern students again held more positive attitudes than previously studied pre and post clinical medical students. Perhaps due to emphasis in the Physical Therapy profession on accommodation for individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion:
Despite the legislative victories of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the Olmstead Decision (1999), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2006) disparities still persist. People with disabilities have higher rates of developing preventable secondary conditions and comorbidities such as heart disease, certain cancers, obesity, smoking, and inactivity as well as lower rates of screening exams. Our research indicated that Northeastern PT students hold more positive attitudes than previously researched groups. Ultimately we hope that more research will be done with larger samples of physical therapy students.

References