Clinicians' Commentary on Ezzat and Maly¹

In a time of continual change within health care delivery and of pressure on individual physiotherapists to be lifelong learners and evidence-based practitioners, mentorship is a key strategy that needs to be understood and supported. We could argue that mentorship is at the core of physiotherapy practice. Mentorship seems a natural part of our profession. We dedicate ourselves to facilitating the growth of our clients; mentorship can be perceived as an extension of this—united in mentorship, we can facilitate the growth of our colleagues and ourselves, and thus shape our profession.

Ezzat and Maly's article "Building passion develops meaningful mentoring relationships among Canadian physiotherapists" studied the meaning of mentorship for Canadian physiotherapists.¹ Using a semi-structured format, the authors interviewed 14 physiotherapists about their experiences with mentorship during their careers. The key themes that emerged were *building passion, keeping fresh, making us stronger, and promoting deeper learning*. Although this study investigated physiotherapists working in private orthopaedic practices, studies of Canadian physiotherapists in other contexts have produced similar findings.²⁻⁴ Ezzat and Maly conclude that building a shared passion for learning, as well as a commitment to each other's success, forms the foundation of meaningful mentorship in physiotherapy.¹ These mentoring relationships enable physiotherapists to adapt to the changing health care system, advance patient care, and develop the physiotherapy profession.

If mentorship is key to advancing patient care and developing the physiotherapy profession, when should mentorship start? It should start with students, continue with new graduates, and extend throughout a physiotherapist's career. The research literature has shown that mentorship for students can assist clinical internship learning and professional skill development; unfortunately, currently existing mentorship programming at the student level is poor.⁵ New graduates may benefit from mentorship that reinforces clinical decision making, boosts motivation through observation of clinical efficiency and competency, and supports the transition to the workplace.^{6,7} Finally, experienced physiotherapists identify mentorship as key to professional success.³

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA), recognizing mentorship as important, developed a mentorship programme with the Ontario Physiotherapy Association that was launched in 2007. CPA defines mentoring as "the process of partnering experienced members with highly motivated members who have a learning need and seek guidance towards achieving a goal."⁸ The programme emphasizes that the mentoring relationship is a reciprocal learning process involving sharing knowledge and experience between individual mentors and mentees, who jointly define the relationship and goals. CPA suggests possible ways that mentors can assist mentees by helping them gain skills in communication, critical questioning, and reflection surrounding professional issues (e.g., conflict resolution, finding resources). The mentoring relationship can address personal, leadership, and career as well as professional development.⁸

Unfortunately, however, as Ezzat and Maly note,¹ enrolment in CPA's mentorship programme is poor. Time constraints are one evident issue; mentors may feel overwhelmed and perceive mentoring as requiring too great an investment of time, given the demands of their profession. But what may be a greater barrier to mentoring is CPA members' lack of understanding of

roles, expectations, and the practical integration of mentorship into their professional lives. Compatibility of partners is also a concern for potential members. Could poor enrolment stem from the preconceived notion, highlighted by Ezzat and Maly, that the mentorship relationship needs to develop "organically"?¹ This poses a great challenge for physiotherapists in the growing private sector, who are isolated from the informal mentorship environments found in large group practice settings yet might well benefit from and thrive on a mentorship relationship.

Mentorship in physiotherapy is also needed in the public health care sector, however. With the recent shift in the rehabilitation delivery system across Canada over the past decade from a department structure to programme management, mentorship is crucial. Historically, department heads and senior physiotherapists guided a team with their clinical expertise and extensive understanding of professionalism. They helped both junior and experienced staff with time and caseload management, conflict resolution, direct patient care, and inter-professional communication. With the loss of this department structure, physiotherapists are now reporting to supervisors who are health care managers and not necessarily physiotherapists; there is no longer direct supervision from physiotherapists to help them with discipline-specific tasks. More importantly, under a programme-management structure, newer graduate physiotherapists have less opportunity to become "culturized" into the PT profession through exposure to a team of physiotherapists. Mentorship is therefore imperative.

Another current issue in acute-care facilities is the large number of new hires in PT. Many physiotherapists begin their careers as casual staff in these settings, as a way to obtain exposure in various domains before deciding what area of practice to pursue. The challenge is for new hires in casual positions to feel that they are gaining both experience and expertise. Mentorship involvement and guidance can help novice physiotherapists evolve with progressive goal setting, reflection, and, ultimately, the acquisition of new clinical skills.

So what should the profession do? The topic of mentorship is a burning issue in health care; and rightfully so. Mentorship can help define the future of our profession by collectively shaping current physiotherapists. We need to think about mentorship as relevant not only for novice professionals but for all practicing physiotherapists, both in private and public sectors, and throughout their entire careers.

Mentorship is a two-way street; both the mentor and mentee benefit from the relationship. The more experienced physiotherapist may help the novice physiotherapist in the area of clinical practice but the new graduate shares strong skills in accessing research and theoretical resources to promote evidence-based practice. As Ezzat and Maly note, the passion of a mentor can be infectious.¹ But truly, isn't this passion infectious both ways? An experienced physiotherapist's mature love for the profession is intertwined with the energy and excitement of a new graduate.

Most of us can reflect on mentors who have influenced us professionally, who have either driven our career or sparked a renewed interest in physiotherapy. Now the challenge is for each of us to consider actively participating in a mentorship relationship. We should "pay it forward" and, collectively, strengthen our profession.

Judy King, PhD, MHSc, BHScPT
Assistant Professor, Physiotherapy Program
School of Rehabilitation Sciences
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa
451 Smyth Road
Ottawa, ON K1H 8M5
jking@uottawa.ca

Martine Quesnel, BSc, MSc, PT
Physiotherapist
The Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre
505 Smyth Road
Ottawa, ON K1H 8M2

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