Global Health: Where Do Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Research Fit?

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Physiotherapy Canada is running a special series on global health, disability, and rehabilitation. But what do we mean by “global health,” and why is it relevant to the practice of all physiotherapists? Our goals in this editorial are to introduce the multifaceted notion of “global health”; to orient readers to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its companion document, the *World Report on Disability* (WRD); and, in closing, to situate this special series as a response to the CRPD and WRD’s call for more high-quality research to better meet the needs of people with disabilities throughout the world.

THE MANY MEANINGS OF “GLOBAL HEALTH”

A buzzword with multiple meanings, the term *global health* is commonly understood as the successor to *international health* – a term used in the global North to describe activities to support people in low-income countries of the global South. *Global health* is understood by many, though not all,¹ to elevate the focus to transnational forces that shape the health of all people. One commonly cited definition of global health is that of Koplan and colleagues, who define it as “an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving health equity for all people worldwide.”^{2(p.1995)} This is a helpful definition in that it is broad and emphasizes equity; it usefully underpins the work of the Global Health Division of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, among many others. All definitions have shortcomings, however, and this framing has been critiqued for being passive and for lacking a clear goal. To transcend these shortcomings, Beaglehole and Bonita have proposed defining global health as “collaborative trans-national research and action for promoting health for all.”³

Others have argued that these definitions of global health fail to explicitly recognize the social, political, and economic forces that so powerfully shape people’s experiences of health, wellness, illness, and disability.¹ Efforts to address this concern have given rise to an alternative framing of health that is proving influential in the domain of global health. The People’s Health Movement, which is largely driven by leaders in the global South, has proposed the following definition:

Health is a social, economic and political issue and above all a fundamental human right. Inequality, poverty, exploitation, violence and injustice are at the root of ill-health and the deaths of poor and marginalized people.^{4(p.2)}

The Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research (CCGHR) aligns itself with this framing of health. CCGHR is a leading network of people (in Canada and around the world) who focus on how research – defined as the production and use of knowledge – can promote better and more equitable health worldwide. Also building on the work of Koplan and colleagues,² CCGHR understands the term *global* as capturing the scope and interconnectedness of any health issue, rather than its location. Global health research, they argue,

studies transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions; involves and collaborates with many disciplines within and beyond the health sciences; and is undertaken in order to inform (and be informed by) policy at the local, national and global levels.⁵

This framing is important because it includes the effects of these forces and circumstances *within* Canada and *by* Canadians around the world. In this way, *global health* is something that we are all part of – not just people outside Canada.

Despite these increasingly progressive understandings of global health, however, the field at large suffers from two chronic and serious shortcomings: insufficient attention to disability and inclusion, and insufficient attention to the roles that rehabilitation can play in addressing these concerns.

Yet there are reasons for optimism.

TWO ACRONYMS EVERY PHYSIOTHERAPIST NEEDS TO KNOW: CRPD AND WRD

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),⁶ which came into force in 2008, is the world’s most recent international human rights treaty. Under development for decades, this groundbreaking agreement – which offers a set of commitments to redress the injustices faced by people with disabilities and to promote more inclusive societies – owes its existence to the work of persistent and forward-thinking disability activists and their allies. More than 100 governments

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around the world (including Canada's, in 2010) have ratified the CRPD, which makes it a legal obligation in those countries. The entire treaty is accessible and well worth reading, but we point physiotherapists in particular to articles 1–3 for the purpose, definitions, and general principles of the CRPD, and to articles 25 and 26 for their explicit focus on rehabilitation.⁶

The *World Report on Disability* (WRD), co-authored by the World Bank and the World Health Organization in 2011, provides the single most comprehensive evidence base to guide the agenda for change established by the CRPD.⁷ The WRD synthesizes data on the current situation for people with disabilities around the world, highlights gaps in knowledge, and advocates for specific forms of research and policy development. Importantly, the WRD also offers recommendations for action toward achieving an inclusive and enabling society that provides equal opportunities for all people with disabilities to fulfil their potential.

The CRPD and the WRD call for action on disability and rehabilitation in the context of global health. One response to this call to action is the Theme Group on Inclusion and Disability, an open network of people with disabilities, researchers, and others interested in advancing rehabilitation and inclusion, jointly coordinated by the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research and the International Centre for Disability and Rehabilitation.⁸ An important avenue for advancing inclusion and rehabilitation is research – which brings us to this *Physiotherapy Canada* special series.

WHY PHYSIOTHERAPY CANADA'S SPECIAL SERIES ON GLOBAL HEALTH, DISABILITY AND REHABILITATION IS A FORM OF INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

This special series responds to the CRPD and WRD's call to promote and disseminate research on rehabilitation and disability. In particular, it is inspired by WRD recommendation 9 – “Strengthen and support research on disability” – which the report describes as “essential for increasing public understanding about disability issues, informing disability policy and programmes, and efficiently allocating resources.”^{9(p.267)} The WRD calls for in-

vestment in human and technical capacity, particularly through North–South partnerships, to build a critical mass of trained disability researchers across “a range of disciplines, including epidemiology, disability studies, health and rehabilitation, special education, economics, sociology, and public policy.”^{9(p.268)} This special series is designed to stimulate dissemination of research across these fields.

Global health is not about “over there.” Global health is a way of focusing on all of us, and on our shared concerns in an increasingly interconnected world. Through this special series, we invite excellent scholarly work that takes inspiration from this worldview.

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