Clinician's Commentary on Coghlan et al.¹

Who is applying and who is being admitted to Ontario Master of Physical Therapy university programs? These are the two important questions that are answered by Coghlan and colleagues' study.¹ This unprecedented review and analysis is long overdue, and Coghlan and colleagues are to be commended for taking a comprehensive, thorough, and reflective approach to comparing Canadian population data with the demographic variables of all applicants to and students of selected Ontario English-language Master of Physical Therapy programs over a 10-year period. The authors are essentially asking (1) are we doing a good job of attracting applicants and admitting students considering provincial and national lenses on population demographics and (2) how can we do better?

This study generated some very interesting findings. Aside from physical therapy's being a female-dominated profession, the demographics of applicants and students are mostly representative of the diverse Canadian population, although the data also indicate that the number of Aboriginal applicants does not reflect the Canadian population. From 2004 to 2014, the number of men applying to and being admitted to physical therapy programs significantly increased, which has resulted in an increase in the number of men practising physical therapy. A trend exists wherein the proportion of male students is slightly less than that of male applicants (36% vs. 33%; 2014 data¹). I'm interested in learning more about this. What might be some factors that contribute to this trend?

For the most part, students applying to English-speaking Master of Physical Therapy programmes come from southern Ontario, typically from large urban population centres, and the proportion of students across geographical regions and population centre size is similar to that of applicants. As Coghlan and colleagues¹ noted, applicants and students from British Columbia outnumber those from all other provinces (other than Ontario); they offer potential explanations for this finding in their Discussion section. Across the 10 years of data, the proportion of total physiotherapy students who self-declared as Aboriginal was slightly higher than the proportion of total applicants who self-declared as Aboriginal. However, the proportion of applicants who self-declared as Aboriginal was less than that in the total population (4.3% in Canada and 2.4% in Ontario).² The authors offer several potential hypotheses for this difference and also identify it as an area for future research. For example, should universities engage with Aboriginal communities to explore the potential of increasing efforts to recruit Aboriginal students to apply to Ontario physiotherapy programs, or should they specifically reserve seats for those who self-declare as Aboriginal and meet the entrance requirements? Efforts to increase the proportion of self-declared Aboriginal physical therapy students to match their proportion of the national population would also match the recommendations of *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*³ that strategies be developed to eliminate education and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians and to increase the number and retention of Aboriginal professionals working in the health care field.

The number of applicants who self-identified as having immigrant status was similar to that of the foreign-born Canadian population and slightly higher than the number of students who identified as having immigrant status. It is important to explore whether this difference is the result of not meeting admission requirements, having challenges with the English language, or differences in grade-point average calculations, as suggested by the authors, or whether other factors in the admission process are challenging applicants and keeping them from becoming students.

Coghlan and colleagues¹ are to be commended for their exceptional efforts in incorporating and analyzing national and provincial databases to reflectively and critically review the admissions process of four Ontario Master of Physical Therapy programs to begin to understand the diversity and composition of physical therapy applicants and students in Ontario, which ultimately has an impact on the physical therapy workforce.

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DOI:10.3138/ptc.2016-23E-CC