Clinician's Commentary on Oosman et al.¹

Cultural safety is a way of interacting with others that requires physiotherapists to be thoughtful, responsive, and humble. It is the outcome of an interaction and can be measured only by the person receiving care. It is not something that health care providers can self-determine. Thus, it places a responsibility for constant self-reflection and ongoing learning in the hands of each individual physiotherapist. As a profession, it requires physiotherapists to work together to foster this competency and demonstrate it through their actions. The way physiotherapists provide care is as valuable as the clinical skills they perform because if physiotherapists do not create a safe environment for their clients, they may not come back to see again.

In some practice environments, physiotherapists make assumptions about why a client did not come back. They label clients non-compliant and place the blame on clients without considering for a moment that they might have contributed to the outcome. By integrating students into this project, Oosman and colleagues¹ allowed students to gain a better understanding of the realities experienced by Indigenous people in Île-à-la-Croix. Although this community has its own individual culture and social structure, many Indigenous communities across Canada face similar circumstances as a result of colonization.

Creating safe spaces for Indigenous people to access health care will occur if physiotherapists can operationalize Call to Action 24 from the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada:²(p. 211)

We call upon medical and nursing schools in Canada to require all students to take a course dealing with Aboriginal health issues, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, and Indigenous teachings and practices. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency.

Oosman and colleagues¹ took on a significant role in addressing this call to action. Immersing physiotherapy students in a Métis community, along with supports to create a safe learning environment, created an opportunity for transformational learning. This type of learning is needed to shift the deeply rooted colonial biases toward Indigenous people in Canada. However, as the researchers identified, their success was likely influenced by the readiness already demonstrated by the community and the students. Without this readiness on the part of each party, there is the potential for harm. As one reflects on the positive outcomes resulting from the experiences of the students and the community members, a thoughtful assessment on the potential negative impacts must be undertaken before recreating this experience for other students and other communities. Some communities will have identified other priorities to support their members' health and well-being.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association published a background paper called "Access to Physiotherapy for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada."³ It identifies the lack of culturally appropriate care for Aboriginal peoples living in Canada and a limited Aboriginal health care workforce as two of the many gaps in rehabilitative services. This finding is consistent with those of

other reports, including one from Brascoupe and Waters in the *Journal of Aboriginal Health* in 2009,⁴ which included recommendations for cultural competency training for professionals who deliver services to Indigenous populations and education on the history of Indigenous populations. The results of this training and education will begin the process of developing cultural safety.

A workforce representative of the population in Saskatchewan would mean that 15% of physiotherapists in that province would self-identify as Indigenous. If this were a reality, it would contribute to the availability of culturally appropriate care. In this ideal situation, Indigenous physiotherapists would provide care to Indigenous clients, which would contribute to the reflective process of all providers by providing an Indigenous lens through which to deliver care.

Training related to cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competency has been noted in previous work as a strategy for improving access to health care services for Indigenous populations.⁵ More recently, *cultural safety* and *cultural humility* have become common terms in the health care sector. It is important to note that these terms are not interchangeable; rather, they are distinct concepts on a continuum. Cultural competency is the acquisition of knowledge about a group of people. *Cultural safety* is the goal of an interaction and can occur only through self-reflection on the part of the provider. *Cultural humility* is a tool to support the reflective process, and that process was supported by the supervisor in this project.

RELATIONSHIPS

In physiotherapy practice, it is important to remember that many Indigenous clients lack trust in mainstream systems. The colonial history of Canada has given Indigenous populations good reason to be apprehensive and untrusting. The Wellesley Institute published a paper in 2015 that describes this history.⁶ As health care providers, physiotherapists represent a system created by colonialism and founded on a foreign perspective of health. As Oosman and colleagues mention, racism and discrimination are attitudes that Indigenous people face when they access health care.¹ It is physiotherapists' responsibility to ensure that they demonstrate the competencies and values that the profession promotes by working to develop safe and trusting relationships with Indigenous clients.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association has identified "ensuring equitable access to physiotherapy" as a priority in its 2018–2023 strategic plan.⁷ Equitable access is not only about ensuring that people in rural and remote areas have access to essential physiotherapy services. It is also about ensuring that any individual requiring support to improve their quality of life can expect to be treated with respect and made an equal partner in developing a treatment plan that meets their unique needs.

It is up to physiotherapists to create a new experience for Indigenous people accessing physiotherapy services. Physiotherapists must create a safe space for every client to have their concerns heard and engage in the process of understanding

the client's perspective, values, and beliefs in order to develop an appropriate care plan together.

The students involved in this study demonstrated the willingness all physiotherapists must have to engage in a cross-cultural experience within the borders of Canada. Creating relationships with the community outside the professional role allows people to learn about physiotherapists as individuals, separate from the system in which they work. This is an effective way to build trust, and it will contribute to an effective therapeutic relationship that both the physiotherapist and the client can learn from.

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