The impact of a specialist physiotherapy service for homeless people: a qualitative study

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Background: Homeless people and their health
Why might homeless people benefit from physiotherapy?

Rehabilitation for...

• Musculoskeletal
• Respiratory
• Neurological

....conditions
What do we know about this topic so far?

Homelessness: reaching out to the hard to reach

Homeless people often fall off the radar of mainstream services, but some physios are trying to change that – over the Christmas period and longer-term. Andrew Cole reports
Aim of this study

To explore the ‘Streetsmart Physio’ service from the perspective of homeless people and those who provide the service.
ETHICS
Data collection:
• semi-structured interviews
• audio recorded
• transcribed verbatim

Data analysis:
• thematic analysis
Participants

Eleven people in total interviewed:

• 4 homeless people who had made use of physiotherapy service (all male)
• 3 homeless people who had not used the service (all male)
• 4 Physiotherapists who volunteer at physiotherapy clinic (three male, one female)
Findings

Value of physiotherapy for homeless people

Participants’ views of Streetsmart Physio service

Considerations for physiotherapists working effectively with homeless people

Barriers to mainstream healthcare

Optimising physiotherapy services for homeless people
Barriers to mainstream healthcare

‘The hospitals they treat you like sh*t, really, sorry for swearing but they dae. As they know you’ve got a drug problem... you’re basically scum of the earth ye know...’

Jimmy, physio service user
The value of physiotherapy for homeless people

‘Em, for me it’s actually helped like my future, eh it’s helped me to figure oot ... what has happened to me and [it’s] not too worrying. It’s good to know’.

William, physio service user

‘You’d be surprised how much trauma is out there. You know, like, people who’ve been beaten up ... there’s quite a lot of injuries or car accidents, people being drunk, being knocked down by cars. Em, a lot of injuries that hadn’t been followed up by the NHS services, so people having fractured femurs not going back to the clinic, developing all sorts of problems with that. So, we’ve picked up quite a lot of chronic conditions because they’d just neglected themselves’.

Ben, volunteer physiotherapist
Participants’ views of Streetsmart Physio service

‘These guys are so thorough, like I would rather come to this than the NHS, This is far more detailed and at a slower pace really’.  

Dave, physio service user

- Evening appointments work well
- ‘Salvation Army bubble’
- Had not heard of the ‘StreetSmart Physio’ service
- Caring and approachable volunteers
- Ideal location
- Homeless people outside the hostel unaware of the service
Considerations for physiotherapists working effectively with homeless people

‘I’m very aware of … saying something simple like oh ‘home exercise programme’ or you know ‘the empty can test’ can just wording that in a way that doesn’t in synonymous to the eh eh eh to the can of alcohol, because a lot of them have alcohol problems’.  

Callum, volunteer physio

‘I feel when I go I feel like I’m not part of society. I am part of society’

Adam, physio service user

Approach: sensitivity, self-awareness and adaptation of treatment

Professional boundaries and scope of practice
Optimising physiotherapy services for homeless people

Stability of accommodation influences access

Enable access to service by wider homeless population

Liaison with established homeless health services
What does this mean in practice?

• Physiotherapy is valued by homeless people who access it
• To support homeless people’s access to physiotherapy, both mainstream and specialist services are needed
• Gathering homeless people’s views is of value for steering future services
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<th><strong>STRENGTHS</strong></th>
<th><strong>WEAKNESSES</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Qualitative design-depth of understanding</td>
<td>Small scale study limited to one site</td>
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<td>By hearing views of service providers and people who had and had not used service, allowed a breadth of understanding</td>
<td>relatively novice researcher carried out data collection and analysis</td>
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• Further research into accessibility of physiotherapy for homeless people

• Improve awareness of need of homeless people amongst physiotherapy service providers
Thank you!

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