



Original article

A qualitative exploration of the factors influencing the job satisfaction and career development of physiotherapists in private practice



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this study was to investigate factors contributing to job satisfaction at different career stages, among private practice physiotherapists in Australia.

Design: Qualitative case study design utilising focus groups.

Participants: Sixteen participants allocated to 3 focus groups: new graduates ($n = 6$), post graduates ($n = 5$) and practice owners ($n = 5$).

Main outcome measures: Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was undertaken to determine themes and subthemes from each focus group.

Results: The key themes identified within each focus group included the role of peer support and mentoring, professional development, professional relationships, new graduate employment issues and career pathways within private practice. In particular, issues surrounding the new graduate experience in private practice were explored, with all groups noting lack of support and financial pressures were of concern.

Conclusions: Findings demonstrated that new graduates are underprepared to work in private practice and modifications to the delivery of peer support, mentoring and professional development is required. Key recommendations include physiotherapy undergraduate program reform to reflect industry requirements in private practice, an increase in private practice clinical placement numbers, as well as streamlining the physiotherapy profession to improve career development pathways.

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1. Introduction/background

Australian workforce data indicates that over half of all registered physiotherapists work in the area of musculoskeletal practice with the majority of those working in private practice (HealthWorkforce, 2014). Increasingly, graduates are being employed into private practice positions yet recent studies indicate that physiotherapy graduates predict short careers (Mulcahy et al., 2010; Bacopanos, 2014). Only 23% of physiotherapy graduates from Curtin University in Western Australia predicted a career of greater than 20 years, with 65% predicting a career of 10 years or less (Mulcahy et al., 2010). Similarly in a survey of physiotherapy graduates from The University of Notre Dame Australia, only 16% of graduates predicted they would remain in the profession long term (Bacopanos, 2014).

Despite increasing graduate workforce numbers, attrition rates in private physiotherapy practice remain high and job satisfaction appears to be an important component of this phenomenon (Mulcahy et al., 2010; Bacopanos, 2014). Peer support and mentoring has been cited in the literature as a strong contributing factor to job satisfaction for physiotherapists (Mulcahy et al., 2010; Bacopanos, 2014). Additional factors identified to increase job satisfaction in physiotherapists include: access to career development opportunities, fair wage, noticeable positive progress of patients, positive relationships with co-workers, job autonomy, supervising students and a pleasant working environment (Mulcahy et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2011; Foster and Sayers, 2012; Maloney et al., 2013; Bacopanos, 2014). Conversely, factors which have been shown to decrease job satisfaction in physiotherapists include: an unrealistic workload, poor workplace support, lack of team communication, family responsibilities, administration requirements, poor patient compliance with treatment and lack of flexibility in schedule (Rozier et al., 1998; Struber, 2003; Chen et al., 2011; Foster and Sayers, 2012; Sliwinski et al., 2014).

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Evidence suggests that the motivating factors and needs of physiotherapists vary depending on their career stage (Keane et al., 2012; Luscombe et al., 2013). Experienced physiotherapists seek access to professional development to update their skillset and remain informed on current clinical evidence (Keane et al., 2012). This is in contrast to graduates who participate in professional development to consolidate new knowledge and recently acquired clinical skills, as well as to follow the path into clinical specialisation (Keane et al., 2012; Luscombe et al., 2013). Younger, less experienced physiotherapists tend to be more motivated by remuneration and the ability to ascend to higher roles as opposed to experienced physiotherapists, who are motivated by altruism and the nature of work (Keane et al., 2012; Luscombe et al., 2013). The aim of this study was to investigate factors contributing to job satisfaction among private practice physiotherapists in Western Australia at different career stages.

2. Methods

The study adopted an embedded single case design (Yin, 1994) where the units of analysis were three private practitioner groups at different career stages. Participants were recruited into one of three focus groups based on career stage, with the study employing criterion-based sampling. Issues surrounding job satisfaction and career development in private practice were explored within each group. The authors put aside all beliefs, coming from a pragmatic paradigm, as described in the work of Creswell (2009) and Guba and Lincoln (1994), to approach the research question and methods without bias. Thus the researchers adopted a positivist approach in a quest for objectivity and neutrality.

2.1. Participants

Physiotherapists were approached via either phone or email through the professional connections of the research team, with further snowball sampling through the networks of those contacted. Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they were Australian qualified physiotherapists working in private practice at least 50% of the time. Thirty physiotherapists were contacted with eleven physiotherapists unable to attend due to work or other commitments at the focus group times offered. A further three did not reply or return phone calls or emails. Sixteen participants were recruited and none withdrew from the study. Participants were classified as 'new graduate' for this study if they had graduated from their physiotherapy degree less than 5 years ago and had no formal postgraduate education. Six new graduates were recruited, 4 females and 2 males with age ranging from 21 to 31 (mean age 24.67 ± 3.56 years). Participants were classified as 'postgraduate' if they had at least 5 years' experience as a physiotherapist and formal postgraduate qualifications. Five postgraduates were recruited, 4 males and 1 female aged 28 to 65 (mean age 37.60 ± 15.74 years). The 'practice owner' focus group included participants who owned their own private practice or were a practice principal. Five practice owners were recruited, 3 females and 2 males aged 26 to 34 (mean age 31 ± 3.08 years).

2.2. Procedures

Pilot interviews were conducted individually with three physiotherapists representing one from each career stage, to develop questions and issues to be explored in the focus groups. Participants from the pilot interviews were not recruited into the focus groups. Focus group questions were developed from expert opinion following the three pilot interviews. Focus groups were conducted at the host university with each group running for approximately

one hour and facilitated by the same researcher, who had no relationship with any of the participants. Each focus group followed a semi-structured format with pre-set questions as well as the opportunity for open-ended discussion. Questions included exploration regarding the factors which positively and negatively influenced participants' job retention and satisfaction. Participants were also asked to discuss their future career intentions and the development of their career as a private practitioner. Further issues explored included the level and type of professional support they were receiving in their current workplace. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Descriptive field notes were taken by the researcher conducting the focus groups. To ensure participants gave their opinions freely, they were reassured that anonymity would be upheld with no one individual named in the process of collecting, analysing and reporting the data, with confidentiality assured.

2.3. Analysis

A thematic analysis of the data was completed with transcripts imported, sorted and coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, Version 10, Melbourne) (NVivo qualitative data analysis software, 2012). Data were coded into themes and further into subthemes for each focus group. Research team members analysed the focus group transcripts independently in order to identify and describe the key themes expressed by participants. This enabled clarity and credibility around the key themes. Discussion regarding key themes were then undertaken to reach consensus of opinion. Conceptual maps were developed to assist with interpretation of data and theme development. An overview of the focus group discussions together with the main themes and sub-themes identified in each group, is presented in the results and identified in the coding framework (Fig. 1).

3. Results

The key themes identified within each focus group included the role of peer support and mentoring, professional development, professional relationships, new graduate employment issues and career pathways within private practice.

3.1. Peer support and mentoring

New graduates reported increased job satisfaction when well supported and mentored, particularly when the practice owner or seniors were readily accessible and approachable. One new graduate commented that *if you have the support you'll tend to want to stay in private practice, but if you don't you will go somewhere else (NG1)*.

Postgraduates identified a lack of avenues available to them for access to peer support and mentoring. They described seeking opportunities for informal meetings between colleagues both within and external to the practice to create peer support and education networks, with one postgraduate noting that *having that sense of collaboration I think, whether it's social or work based with your colleagues is important (PG2)*.

Creating an environment where colleagues could access peer support and mentoring was important to practice owners, however practice owners themselves felt under-supported. One participant identified that the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) was well positioned to support practice owners but did not believe they were receiving sufficient assistance. One practice owner commented *they've got to realise that if 55% of jobs are coming out of private practice then they need to support the private practice owners so that they can do a better job (PO1)*.

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