



# Collaborative goal setting with adults attending physiotherapy at a specialist neuromuscular centre: is it always appropriate? A cross-sectional survey

S.E. Hartley\*, R.C. Stockley

*Department of Health Professions, Birley Campus, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK*

## Abstract

**Objectives** Collaborative goal setting is an integral component of treatment planning for adults with neuromuscular disorders (NMD). However, due to the unique challenges for these individuals, identifying a process for goal setting that is advantageous for all can be problematic. This study aimed to evaluate collaborative goal setting at a specialist NMD centre, as reported by service users attending physiotherapy. It also aimed to generate discussion about collaborative goal setting and the practice of goal setting in adults with NMD in order to inform future practice.

**Setting** Specialist NMD community-based centre in the UK.

**Participants** One hundred and four adults with NMD who attended the centre.

**Design** Cross-sectional survey. Thematic and content analyses of goals set were performed alongside demographic data collection.

**Results** One hundred and four patients (34 females) with a range of neuromuscular conditions – including Becker, facioscapularhumeral, limb girdle, Duchenne and myotonic muscular dystrophies – completed the survey. Thirty-six respondents (37%) stated that they had set goals with the physiotherapist, whilst 62 (63%) stated that they had not set goals with the physiotherapist. Respondents' goals were grouped into four themes: symptom management, maintenance, improving physical condition, and learning to live with the condition.

**Conclusions** Readiness to take part in collaborative goal setting is unique to each individual. Physiotherapists need to be skilful in supporting adults with NMD through the goal-setting process until they are capable of sharing responsibility. Setting personal goals to improve emotional well-being may help to develop confidence to take more control of their situation, hence facilitating skills in self-management.

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**Keywords:** Neuromuscular disorders; Goal setting; Self-management; Long-term conditions

## Introduction

Muscular dystrophy and its related neuromuscular disorders (NMD) are a frequently hereditary and diverse group of conditions that lead to abnormal muscle pathology with resultant muscle weakness and functional loss [1–5]. Although there is still no consensus on optimal physiotherapy for these disorders, and specific guidelines for their management are

lacking, collaborative goal setting is considered to be an integral component of the rehabilitation process [6–9]. Collaborating, by working in partnership with patients to reach a consensus when setting goals, is also a requirement to meet professional standards for physiotherapy [10,11].

There are many benefits to collaborative goal setting, including encouraging active participation of the patient in their management, providing shared outcomes for clinicians and patients to work towards, and facilitating patients to become more self-determining [12–17]. However, there are inconsistencies in its use amongst clinicians, and there is no defined approach for collaboration [6,18–21]. Patients also need to want, and be able, to participate in the process [8,22,23].

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Health Professions, Brooks Building, Birley Campus, Manchester Metropolitan University, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester M15 6GX, UK. Tel.: +44 01612472901; fax: +44 0161 247 6367.

E-mail address: [s.hartley@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:s.hartley@mmu.ac.uk) (S.E. Hartley).

Following a structured format when setting goals has been found to be more likely to engage patients and be more patient centred [14,24]. However, there is inconclusive evidence that structuring goal setting is more effective in achieving outcomes [9,24,25]. This suggests that the process alone cannot be credited for successful goal attainment. Indeed, the promotion of focused goals that are meaningful to the patient recognises the importance of the type of goals set [10,17]. If patients perceive that goals are relevant to them and have a worthwhile outcome, they are more likely to want to undertake and achieve these goals [13,25]. Consequently, in order to ensure that goals are significant to the patient, a partnership where patients are supported to take an active role in shaping these goals is likely to be essential [17,21]. However, collaborating in this way has been found to be problematic, with differences between clinicians' and patients' expectations of roles and what can be achieved, and differing views on which goals are important or achievable [6,12,20,21,23]. This is even more complex for individuals with NMD as access to regular, specialist physiotherapy is often limited [26,27]. This means that the opportunity for adults with NMD to be guided through the goal-setting process, including identifying and monitoring appropriate goals, is likely to be inconsistent at best.

The catalyst for this article arose when data from a previous study, on the utilization of physiotherapy at a neuromuscular centre (NMC), found that many clients reported that they had not set goals with their physiotherapist [28]. When the authors collected the data, collaborative goal setting was usual physiotherapy practice at the NMC, but there was no set procedure amongst the physiotherapists for undertaking this process [29]. This study aimed to evaluate goal setting at the NMC, as viewed by service users who attend for physiotherapy. The intention was to gain insight into what may influence clients' reporting of goal setting, the type of goals set and how these are articulated by clients. A secondary aim of this study was to generate discussion around collaborative goal setting, and to consider the practice of goal setting in adults with NMD, in order to inform future practice.

## Methods

### *Participants*

One hundred and thirty-three clients who attended for physiotherapy at the NMC between July and September 2010 were invited to participate.

### *Design*

A prospective, cross-sectional survey of adult users of the NMC physiotherapy service was employed for this study.

### *Questionnaire*

Questions analysed for this study were part of a 13-item questionnaire that was developed to evaluate physiotherapy provision at the NMC. Two questions that asked if participants had set goals with their physiotherapist and if they were satisfied with the physiotherapy provision were used in order to gain some insight into goal setting at the NMC, and if this influenced patient satisfaction with the physiotherapy received. Participants were also asked to record the goals that they had set with their physiotherapist. This information was collated with demographic details of all participants.

Following an initial pilot of the questionnaire with nine service users, the finalised questionnaire with detailed information about the study was given to all clients aged  $\geq 18$  years when they attended for physiotherapy between July and September 2010. To ensure anonymity was maintained, each participant was asked to include a unique code on the questionnaire that was identifiable only to them, should they wish to withdraw their information.

### *Data analysis*

All data collected were summarised and presented descriptively. The participants' goals were analysed thematically with open coding. An established framework for identifying goal-setting themes was not used as the researchers aimed to construct an interpretation of the nature of the goals from the participants' perspective rather than forcing them into preconceived categories [30]. Using this inductive process is a distinct approach to the quantitative methods used to describe the data initially [31]. By viewing the same social experience from different perspectives, the authors aimed to draw on the strengths of both methods in order to give a broader account of the goal-setting phenomenon [31,32].

Goals were initially coded independently by the two authors (SH and RS). Both read the goals repeatedly to gain an overview before writing a word or phrase by the side of each that reflected the nature of the goal prior to meeting to develop the themes. Goals that were deemed to be similar were grouped together into subthemes. Related subthemes were further combined to form the overarching theme of the goals that were set. Any initial differences in theme labelling were resolved through reflective dialogue by the authors, and the creation of diagrammatic representations of themes with their associated goals (see Table 1). A third researcher peer reviewed the process and corroborated the findings to improve credibility. Goals related to their overarching themes were subjected to content analysis [33].

## Results

In total, 133 clients accessed physiotherapy at the NMC during the survey period; of these, 125 agreed to take the

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