

Review article

Qi Gong and physiotherapy: A narrative review and conceptual synthesis

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Abstract

Background: The practice of Qi Gong is based on the following assumptions: complexity and multidimensionality, various positive influences on an individual's wholeness through the mind, body, and the relationships between them. In a similar vein, the essence of physiotherapy as a multifaceted process requires teamwork and the efforts of various specialists such as psychologists, sociologists, occupational therapists, and nurses if patients are to benefit.

Aims: This paper aims to present the conceptual integration of Qi Gong and physiotherapy when considering the essence of their underlying principles. The author also emphasizes the usefulness of Qi Gong practice in clinical units and explains how Qi Gong might be extrapolated and incorporated into the theoretical principles of the physiotherapy process.

Methods: This paper reviews Qi Gong literature in a narrative manner. Consequently, during the discourse analysis some information regarding Qi Gong's and physiotherapy's essence is derived from the presented data to reveal the underlying core principles and the conceptual interface of both practices on the level of abstraction grounded in the qualitative approaches.

Results: Within the scope of this article the existence of several similarities between these two 'concepts' has been suggested in terms of their multidisciplinary approach toward patients and complexity of holistic care.

Discussion: Researchers, physiotherapists and their patients as well as Qi Gong practitioners can obtain valuable and additional arguments through the cross-fertilization of ideas across presented studies united by shared, underlying concepts.

Conclusion: Such conceptual enrichment may be a useful source of inspiration for physiotherapists concerned about their patients' overall health on a daily basis.

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Keywords: Qi Gong; Physiotherapy; Review; Concept formation

Introduction

Qi Gong adjunctive therapy and a way of promoting and maintaining wellness offer an excellent example of the mind–body connection [1,2]. It is suggested that Qi Gong may have diverse clinical and non-clinical applications in the physiotherapy process. This is mainly attributed to the degree of complexity and multidimensionality of influences that is apparent in both Qi Gong exercises and physiotherapy as continuous processes. On the other hand, a

definition of physiotherapy may be as follows: a healthcare profession which utilizes bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approaches to promote, maintain and restore physical, psychological and social well-being, taking into account variations in individuals' health status and world view [3].

In this narrative review, the author aims to present results from various pieces of research on Qi Gong and conceptually combine them with the core principles of the physiotherapy process. The rationale for this combination is that Qi Gong's philosophy and physical exercises (movement forms) share a number of basic underlying principles with the physiotherapy process. First of all, the principles of Qi Gong resonate with the principles of the physiotherapy process with respect to their holistic approach towards the health and well-being of

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an individual – all the body's dimensions (i.e. cells, tissues and organs) can be influenced simultaneously within one entire system. From this holistic-integrative perspective, the similarities between Qi Gong and physiotherapy on the conceptual level include the physiological, psychological, spiritual and social dimensions of an individual's health. Also, Qi Gong exercises combined with the physiotherapy process both in clinical and non-clinical settings can affect various bodily structures and systems such as the musculoskeletal, nervous, cardio-pulmonary, endocrine or immune systems and this would be beneficial for patients with neurological, orthopaedic, metabolic and psychosomatic impairments [4,5].

Yet another aim of this study is to present Qi Gong's potential role in terms of the whole physiotherapy process. Such theoretical cross-fertilization of their mutual assumptions would lead to various benefits in terms of the patient mind–body relationship and general wellness. Consequently, this would imply the possible synthesis of Qi Gong with the physiotherapy process at the conceptual level with some practical guidelines to follow up. These guidelines would include Qi Gong movements embedded in the principles of the physiotherapy process to stimulate recovery processes throughout the patient's entire body. A further aim of this paper is to indicate potential development prospects within the physiotherapy process due to such 'conceptual enrichment' and how it would enhance the patient's sense of well-being and the physiotherapist's holistic approach.

Finally, the reader or physiotherapist will be asked to form his or her own opinion on Qi Gong's qualities as a part of the physiotherapy process, attributes and 'mechanisms' beyond the description provided and ask why it works, how and on what level? The inspirational answers for these questions may enhance self-education, and increase the level of knowledge and own understanding of this integrative approach. The possible integration of Qi Gong's essence, such as the beneficial effect on overall health, could be taught at the academic level among physiotherapy students. The practice of such conceptual congruence may require some changes in physiotherapy curricula, which might be useful for future therapists. The author hopes that through this conceptual synthesis physiotherapists will gain an understanding of the philosophy and some practical knowledge of Qi Gong [4].

Brief characteristics of Qi Gong

Qi Gong is a system of therapeutic Chinese exercises that has been used and developed over thousands of years to develop energy (Qi) in the body, mind, and spirit [6]. The basic principles of Qi Gong, which promotes health and vitality through gentle breathing exercises, are grounded in the Taoist and Buddhist philosophies and traditional Chinese medicine [7,8]. Qi Gong in Chinese means Qi (vital energy) and Gong (skill or art) and is essentially regarded by practitioners as a way of working with energy.

Western science considers Qi Gong to be a combination of meditation, controlled breathing and physical movements designed to control the vital energy (Qi) of the body and consequently a way to improve spiritual, physical, and mental health [9]. Qi Gong experts frame it as a "mind-in-body" practice rather than mind–body interaction. It is a form of complementary therapy and a method of health improvement that tranquilizes the mind and is known to reduce the body's imbalances [1,2,10]. However, most importantly, Qi Gong is scientifically valuable, reliable, clinically relevant, and effective as described by Mayer [11] in a study that took place over 20 years ago and which reported significant differences between a group practicing this form of activity and a control group in terms of a variety of outcome measures including reduction in total mortality rate.

Beneficial aspects of Qi Gong in clinical practice

There are several clinical implications to the consideration of Qi Gong exercises as a useful adjunct to the physiotherapy process. Frequently, physiotherapists have to manage serious clinical conditions including cardiologic, metabolic, musculoskeletal, orthopaedic, and psychosomatic disorders. Research results that can be considered as directly related to physiotherapists' background and practice and some of the most relevant beneficial aspects of Qi Gong in the clinical setting are presented below. It is believed that this will provide an insight into the broadness of Qi Gong's effect on the body's homeostasis and therefore congruence with the physiotherapy process at the conceptual level.

Cardio-respiratory improvements

The increased blood circulation after Qi Gong exercises creates 'warmness' in the body [12]. Moreover, significant differences were found in the volume of oxygen consumed, carbon dioxide produced, frequency of breath and expired ventilation. The study also showed an improvement of nearly 20% in ventilatory efficiency for oxygen uptake and carbon dioxide production suggesting that Qi Gong may have useful therapeutic value [13]. This therapeutic modality can be beneficial for increasing the patient's aerobic endurance [14] and can cause bradycardia and vagotony [10,15]. It can be suggested that physiotherapists could utilize Qi Gong to facilitate recovery processes among stroke patients and improve their function.

Qi Gong can have a broad spectrum of clinical applications. For instance, in hypertensive patients, Qi Gong practice resulted in decreased systolic blood pressure and reduced risk of stroke incidence and reduced dosage of drugs required for blood pressure maintenance [11,16–18]. It is an efficient method of improving quality of life in cardiac disease patients [19]. It has been suggested that Qi Gong exercises may also alleviate asthma symptoms, as well as modulate inflammation processes [20]. In asthma

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