**Research study ‘Developing Standards of Practice for Physiotherapists working with Adults with a Learning Disability’**

**Update No 3.**

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At the time of researching there was no standard definition or descriptions for the role~~s~~ of the specialist learning disabilities physiotherapist. We had become aware that specialist physiotherapy posts have been downgraded and some decommissioned entirely. In many multi-disciplinary teams’ physiotherapists are being asked to do roles that are outside of their scope of practice or to take on tasks that detract from their specialist roles. Without a clear definition and without clear national standards for the descriptions for the role~~s~~, the profession has evolved guided by local priorities and pressures, dependent on local commissioning. This has led to individuals and local teams developing their own standards, resulting in wide variations in the commissioning and delivery of services across the United Kingdom.

In response we conducted a five round Modified Delphi Technique study to develop a definition and descriptions of the roles for the specialist learning disabilities physiotherapist. This involved a review of the current literature and four rounds of questionnaires to explore the views and opinions of an expert panel recruited via the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists for People with Learning Disabilities (ACPPLD)

**A new definition of ‘The Role of the Learning Disabilities Physiotherapist’**

‘Learning disability physiotherapists provide specialist assessment, treatment and management to adults with a learning disability whose needs cannot be successfully met by mainstream services, even when reasonable adjustments are made. Physiotherapists will work in collaboration with the person, their support network, mainstream health services, and the multidisciplinary team to enhance, optimise and maintain the person’s physical presentation, function and quality of life’

For **specialist learning disabilities physiotherapists** to deliver on this definition they MUST**:**

* Make the adjustments required to provide successful physiotherapy to adults with a learning disability that are unreasonable for mainstream services.
* Assess and consider whether mainstream services are better placed to successfully meet the individual’sphysiotherapy needs.
* Consider whether supporting the person to attend mainstream services will increase the chances of a successful outcome.
* Work in collaboration with mainstream physiotherapy and other relevant healthcare services in the assessment, treatment, management and monitoring of adults with a learning disability to ensure positive access and successful outcome.

For **physiotherapy services** to deliver on this definition they **MUST:**

* Be based on clinical need, not on an assumed level of a person’s learning disability.
* Be accessible and equitable to all adults with a learning disability and a physiotherapy need whose needs cannot be met successfully by mainstream services even when reasonable adjustments are made. This includes:
* Where mainstream physiotherapists lack the specialist skills required to provide successful physiotherapy to the person with a learning disability.
* When the adjustments required to successfully provide physiotherapy to the person go beyond what is reasonable for mainstream service to provide.
* Where mainstream physiotherapy services are not available and/or accessible locally to meet the physiotherapy needs of the person with a learning disability.
* Offer and deliver the roles outlined in the soon to be published standards of practice.

**The adjustments specialist learning disability physiotherapy services make to provide physiotherapy to adults with learning disabilities**

Public sector organisations have to make changes in their approach or provision to ensure that services are accessible to disabled people as well as everybody else (Equalities Act 2010). These changes are described as reasonable adjustments designed to overcome the barriers that people with disability face when accessing services. The ACPPLD recognise that the majority of people with a learning disability can successfully access mainstream physiotherapy services when reasonable adjustments are made. In 2016 the ACPPLD launched the ‘so your next patient has a learning disability’ campaign. This involved publishing an information booklet providing advice and guidance for physiotherapists not specialising in learning disabilities on making reasonable adjustments to support with learning disability to access mainstream physiotherapy. The advice covers a range of adjustments mainstream physiotherapist may need to make through the service users’ journey.

The campaign provides valuable evidence about the level of adjustments expected of mainstream. It is when the adjustments required to provide successful physiotherapy to a person goes beyond this level that specialist learning disability services are required. Providing this level of adjustments is a specialist area of physiotherapy in itself and requires a specialist set of knowledge and skills. They also require a model of working which facilitates the development and relationships with people and their network of care; prolonged episodes of care; more time to assess and treat; providing a continuity of care; taking a proactive approach; and being able to review and monitor people. This is just not possible in mainstream healthcare services. It is the knowledge and skills in making these ‘unreasonable’ adjustments that is the unique skills set of the specialist learning disability physiotherapist.

Therefore, if the government is serious about meeting the physiotherapy needs of people with a learning disability, they must prioritise, resource and commission specialist learning disability physiotherapy teams appropriately. We explore and outline the adjustments the specialist learning disability physiotherapists make in a chapter in the standards of practice document.

**The roles of the learning disabilities physiotherapist fall under three categories; Lead, Contributory and Supporting**

The **Lead roles** are to deliver 24hr postural management, community level respiratory management, falls prevention and intervention, management of mobility problems and rehabilitation from acute injuries/conditions. These are the roles that the specialist learning disability physiotherapist **MUST** take lead responsibility for providing where the adult with a learning disability is unable to successfully access mainstream services, even when reasonable adjustments are made. The provision of these roles is likely to depend on the physiotherapy needs of the local population of adults with learning disability and the accessibility and provision of local physiotherapy and healthcare services. Physiotherapists **MUST** develop and maintain specialist knowledge, skills and experience in these areas to be able to successfully deliver physiotherapy to adults with learning disabilities.

The **Contributory roles** are to offer interventions such as dysphagia management, health promotion, specialist level respiratory management, complex therapeutic manual handling, and the management of spasticity and hypertonia. Physiotherapists will contribute their specialist knowledge, skills and experience to support a multidisciplinary, multiagency approach to successfully meet health needs of the person.

The **Supporting roles** underpin the provision of physiotherapy and include training and education, transition; multidisciplinary team working; assessment and provision of specialist equipment.

**The roles of Specialist Learning Disability Physiotherapy Services:**

**DEFINITION**

Rehabilitation from acute injuries &/or conditions

Community level respiratory management

**CONTRIBUTORY**

**ROLES**

Multidisciplinary management of dysphagia

Training and education of adults with learning disabilities, their care network, professionals

& community services

Promoting the role of the Specialist Learning Disability Physiotherapist

**SUPPORTING**

**ROLES**

“Learning disability physiotherapists provide specialist assessment, treatment and management to adults with a learning disability whose needs cannot be successfully met by mainstream services even when reasonable adjustments are made.



Falls prevention &

Intervention

24hr

Postural

Management

Management of mobility problems

**LEAD**

**ROLES**

Health promotion

Complex & therapeutic manual handling

Specialist level respiratory management

Management of spasticity & hypertonia

Assessment & provision of specialist equipment

Transition of young people from

Paediatric to adult

services

Supporting coordinated approach to care and multi-disciplinary, agency working

The standards of practice outline the optimal role of specialist learning disability physiotherapy services based on the available evidence and opinion of an expert panel. However, there are often a range of local drivers that impact the way specialist learning disability services are delivered. These include:

* Local employers’ agendas
* Staffing resources
* Service commissioning,
* Local mainstream health and social care services
* Population variations and needs

Therefore, physiotherapists must develop an in-depth understanding of how commissioning, the population, and mainstream services influences current physiotherapy provision and delivery. To support you to do this, we have included a chapter that will provide you with guidance on how to develop this knowledge, as well as support you to implement the standards into practice. This includes tools to baseline your current practice against the standards; develop an understanding of your local population; understand the availability and accessibility of local mainstream and other relevant healthcare services; prioritise and ration service delivery; and evidence the impact of specialist learning disability physiotherapy both from a clinical and financial perspective.

**Next steps**

We have been busy sharing the findings of the research and promoting the role of the specialist learning disability physiotherapist. We have presented to the South East and Trent regions of the ACPPLD; and at Health Education England event for AHPs in learning disabilities. We have also displayed posters at a number of events. We are always looking for more opportunities to disseminate the results and raise awareness of our profession. Please make contact if you are aware any opportunities within your local areas.

The second draft is almost finished, and we will be sending it back out to a review panel (including the NEC) in the next couple of weeks. Our aim is to have it ready for distribution by this summer.

The final document is going to be over 180 pages. Our aim is to develop it so that each section can be accessed as a standalone topic, making it something that people can ‘dip ‘into.

At the moment we are not planning for it to be printed but are hoping it will be accessible via the ACPPLD website in a dynamic and interactive format that makes moving around the document easy, with quick referencing and hyperlinks etc. We are on a steep learning curve, so if anyone has any skill or knowledge on how to go about that please contact me?

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