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***Evaluation of a practice based
physiotherapy service***

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BACKGROUND

A number of advantages have been cited for general practitioner direct referral to physiotherapy. These advantages include a reduction in waiting time for service, reduction in amount of physiotherapy required, and reduction in pressure on outpatient clinics, speedier recovery time, convenience and increased patient and GP satisfaction. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽²⁾ In November 1996 a practice-based physiotherapy service was established in a socially disadvantaged area on a pilot basis. The service was funded by the Eastern Health Board GP Unit for GMS patients only.

The objective was to provide practice based physiotherapy services to GP practices within the area. Access to the service was provided to a selected group of GPs from four practices in the area that could refer appropriate patients to the service. Prior to the availability of the new service, the practices referred patients to outpatient departments in St James's Hospital and in the Adelaide Hospital for physiotherapy services. One dedicated physiotherapist was employed to provide four sessions per week for a one-year period. The physiotherapist was based in one of the referring practices, located in the local shopping centre. This location was adjacent to all the referring practices.

Funding for the physiotherapist was provided by the Eastern Health Board GP Unit. In keeping with the National Health Strategy document ⁽³⁾ the project was subject to evaluation.

A service audit was carried out by the physiotherapist who sent in monthly returns regarding service use to the GP Unit.

The Department of Public Health in the Eastern Health Board was asked to evaluate the service. The Department recommended that a patient satisfaction survey be carried out. This recommendation was made in keeping with the National Health Strategy emphasis on a consumer oriented health service. The GP Unit made available their research assistant to support the evaluation. This report provides the results of the patient satisfaction survey.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study was to measure patient satisfaction with the practice based physiotherapy service.

METHODOLOGY

All patients attending the direct access physiotherapy service between April and June 1997 were informed by the physiotherapist that a research study was taking place.

Qualitative research

Focus group:

The researcher conducted a focus group in December 1996. The physiotherapist selected and invited patients to take part in a focus group with the researcher. This took place in the General Practice surgery where the physiotherapist was located. The purpose of the focus group was to generate questions for a self-completion postal questionnaire

Eight GMS patients took part in the focus group. Five participants were female and all had previously attended the physiotherapy service. The age range of participants was 35 to 55 years.

The following themes were discussed within the group in relation to practice based physiotherapy:

- Access
- Equity
- Efficiency
- Expectations of service
- Satisfaction with service delivery
- Satisfaction with service location
- Experience of other physiotherapy services

- Convenience

Quantitative research

A postal patient satisfaction survey was conducted between June and August 1997. Self-completion postal questionnaires were sent to the 135 patients discharged from the service during this time period. An accompanying letter was enclosed with the questionnaire. Respondents were given a pre-paid envelope addressed to the Eastern Health Board.

Follow up continued until October 1997. Up to three reminder letters were sent and in some cases a reminder telephone call was made if questionnaires were not returned.

Details of age, sex and condition of respondents were provided by the physiotherapist.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was carried out using EPI Info version 6.

RESULTS

135 patients took part in the survey. Replies were received from 95 , which represented a 70% response rate.

PATIENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Patient profile

Age

44 respondents (49%) were aged less than 44 years. 40 respondents (45%) were in the 45-64 years age category. 5 respondents (6%) were aged over 65 years. (Table)

Table 1. Age of patients referred

Age category	No.	%
<24	18	20
25-44	26	29
45-64	40	45
65-74	5	6
Total	89	100

Gender

Three fifths (60%) of those attending the service were female.(Table)

Table 2. Gender of patients

Gender	No.	%
Male	38	40
Female	57	60
Total	95	100

Eligibility

All respondents were GMS eligible.

Reason for referral

Table 3. Principal reason for referral (N=80)

Reason	No.	%
Orthopaedic	37	46
Trauma	25	31
Rheumatology	10	13
Inflammation	5	6
Chest	2	3
Neurological complaint	1	1
Total	80	100

The physiotherapist provided details of each patient's reason for referral. 46% of patients were attending with orthopaedic complaints. 31% were attending for trauma and 13% had a rheumatological complaint.

Table 4. First point of contact with physiotherapy department (N=95)

1st point of contact	No.	%
GP made contact	39	41
Patient posted GP letter	28	30
Telephone	13	14
Patient called in	10	11
Other	5	5
TOTAL	95	100

Patients were asked about their first appointment. The most common first point of contact for patients was *their GP making contact with the physiotherapist* (n=39) followed by *patient posting a GP letter* (n=28).

Table 5. Duration of symptoms at 1st physiotherapy visit (N=94)

	No.	%
< 1 week	4	4
1 - 2 weeks	15	16
3 - 4 weeks	12	13
5 - 6 weeks	8	9
7 - 12 weeks	5	5
3 - 6 months	8	8
> 6 months	42	45

Total	94	100
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Patients were asked how long they had been experiencing their symptoms. One third (33%) of respondents had their symptoms for less than one month when they received physiotherapy treatment. 20% of respondents had their symptoms for between 1-6 months. 45% of patients experienced their symptoms for greater than six months when they received physiotherapy treatment.

Reason for referral explained by GP

Table 6. Reason for referral explained to patient by GP (N=91)

Doctor explain reason for referral	No.	%
Yes	76	84
No	13	14
Unsure	2	2
TOTAL	91	100

The majority of patients (76/91) had the purpose of their physiotherapy treatment explained to them by their GP. Thirteen patients did not have their reason for referral explained to them and two were unsure.

Waiting time

Table 7. Waiting time from referral to obtaining physiotherapy (N=93)

	No.	%
< 1 week	27	29
1 - 2 weeks	56	60
3 - 4 weeks	6	7
5 - 6 weeks	3	3
7 - 12 weeks	1	1
Total	93	100

Patients were asked how long they waited for a first appointment. 89% of respondents received an appointment in less than two weeks. 92 out of 93 patients commenced physiotherapy treatment within 6 weeks of referral.

Table 8. Satisfaction with waiting time (N=94)

Level of satisfaction	No.	%
Very satisfied	62	66
Mostly satisfied	24	26
Dissatisfied	4	4
Very dissatisfied	4	4
Total	94	100

92% of patients expressed satisfaction with their waiting time for first appointment. Of the patients who were *dissatisfied* with their waiting time for first appointment, three had waited between one and two weeks and one had waited between three and four weeks. Of the patients who were *very dissatisfied* with their waiting time for first appointment, three had waited between one and two weeks and one had waited between seven and 12 weeks.

Table 9. Why dissatisfied with waiting time (N=5)

Reason for dissatisfaction	No.	%
Was in pain	3	60
Required treatment sooner	2	40
Total	5	100

Five patients made comments on why they were dissatisfied with their waiting time for first appointment. Three patients said they were in pain and two felt that they should have been treated more quickly. Two of the patients who were in pain had waited between 1 - 2 weeks for an appointment. The third patient experiencing pain had waited between 3 - 4 weeks. Of the two patients who required treatment sooner, one had waited between 1 - 2 weeks and the other had waited between 7 - 12 weeks for a first appointment.

Table 10. Location of physiotherapy treatment (N=89)

Service location	No.	%
Own doctor	39	44
Neighbouring doctor	50	56
Total	89	100

Patients were asked whether they attended for physiotherapy treatment in their own doctor's surgery or in a neighbouring doctor's practice. Just over half (56%) of all respondents were treated in the neighbouring doctor's surgery.

Table 11. Satisfaction with location (N=92)

Level of satisfaction	No.	%
Very satisfied	74	80
Mostly satisfied	11	12
Dissatisfied	4	4
Very dissatisfied	3	3
Total	92	100

Patients were then asked how satisfied they were with the location of the physiotherapist. 92% expressed satisfaction with the service location.

Table 12. Why dissatisfied with location (N=6)

Reason for dissatisfaction	No.	%
Inconvenient	5	83
Transport difficulties	1	17
Total	6	100

Respondents who had expressed dissatisfaction with the location of the service were invited to give a reason for their response. Six respondents offered comments. Five patients mentioned the inconvenience of the location while one person had experienced transport difficulties. All six patients were from other doctor's surgeries.

Patients who attended a neighbouring doctor's surgery for treatment were asked about any problems associated with this. Eight patients responded to this question; four patients noted transport difficulties and the remaining four cited inconvenience.

Table 13. How did patient travel for physiotherapy? (N=93)

Mode of transport	No.	%
Walked	63	68
Car	17	18
Bus	10	11
Taxi	3	3

Total	93	100
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Patients were asked which mode of transport they used to travel to the surgery. Over two thirds (68%) of patients walked to the surgery for their treatment. 18% travelled by car and 11% by bus. Three respondents went by taxi. Eight patients mentioned that they used up to two modes of transport. Of these patients, four travelled by taxi, three walked and one travelled by car.

Table 14. How far did patient travel for physiotherapy treatment? (N=63)

Miles travelled	No.	%
< 1 mile	71	77
1 - 2 miles	12	13
3 - 4 miles	8	9
> 5 miles	1	1
Total	63	100

Over three-quarters (77%) of patients travelled less than one mile for treatment. 22% travelled between 1 - 4 miles. Just one respondent needed to travel over five miles to the service location.

Table 15. Did travelling to the physiotherapist cause any problems? (N=93)

Travel problems	No.	%
No	81	87
Yes	12	13
Total	93	100

Respondents were asked whether travelling to the physiotherapist had been a problem for them. 87% had not experienced any travel difficulties.

Table 16. Comments regarding travel (N=16)

Comment	No.	%
Had to rely on private transport / Public transport difficulties	8	57
Difficulty walking home after treatment/ walking made problem worse	3	21
Difficulty getting in/ out of car	2	14
Difficulty getting convenient appointment time	1	7
Total	14	100

Respondents were invited to make a comment regarding travelling to the surgery for treatment. Fourteen patients made comments. Eight patients (57%) mentioned having to rely on private transport to get to and from the surgery or public transport difficulties. Three patients said that walking home after a treatment session made their condition worse and two patients experienced problems getting in and out of a car after treatment. One patient mentioned difficulty in getting a convenient appointment time.

Table 17. Did physiotherapist discuss condition with patient, discuss the aims of treatment with patient and understand patient's problem? (N=94)

Physiotherapy consultation	No. of patients who answered 'yes'	% of patients who answered 'yes'
Discuss condition with patient?	93	99
Discuss the aims of treatment?	93	99
Understand patient's problem?	88	94

Respondents were asked whether the physiotherapist discussed the patient's condition, discussed the aims of treatment and understood the patient's problem. In 99% of cases the physiotherapist had carried out the first two functions. 94% of respondents said that the physiotherapist had understood their problem.

Table 18. Was patient satisfied with the physiotherapy treatment received? (N= 94)

Level of satisfaction	No.	%
Very satisfied	62	66
Mostly satisfied	23	25
Dissatisfied	3	3
Very dissatisfied	6	6
Total	94	100

Patients were asked whether they were satisfied with the physiotherapy treatment received. 91% expressed satisfaction and 9% expressed dissatisfaction.

Table 19. Why patient was dissatisfied with physiotherapy treatment. (N=11)

Reason for dissatisfaction	No. of comments	% of comments
Still in pain / condition not better	4	27
Condition now worse	4	27
Dissatisfied with diagnosis made by physiotherapist / professionalism of physiotherapist / length of consultation time	3	21
Not enough consultations	2	13
Treatment aids did not work	2	13
Total	15	100

Respondents were given the opportunity to state their reason for dissatisfaction with treatment. Although only nine patients had indicated dissatisfaction with treatment, two additional offered a reason for dissatisfaction. Four patients offered two reasons (Table 19).

Table 20. Patient Confidence in self- management of condition at discharge (N=73)

Yes		No		Don't know	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
55	73	15	20	5	7

Patients were asked whether they felt confident to manage their condition at discharge. Almost three-quarters (73%) expressed confidence. 20% were not confident and 7% were unsure. Even though the survey was meant to be for patients who were discharged from the service, 13 respondents said they were still attending for treatment. Their answers were excluded from the above table.

Table 21. Patient condition at discharge (N=92)

	No.	%
Completely better	13	14
Improved a lot	42	46
Improved a little	16	17
The same	14	15
Worse	7	8
Total	92	100

Patients were asked about their condition at discharge. 46% of respondents said that their condition had improved a lot while 14% said that their condition was completely better. 17% reported a little improvement. 15% of respondents said their condition was the same while 8% said it was worse. Of the 21 patients who said that their condition at discharge was the same or worse, two were still attending for treatment.

Comments regarding physiotherapy treatment

At the end of the questionnaire, patients were invited to make up to three comments regarding their physiotherapy treatment. The following tables provide a summary of these comments.

Table 22. Comments regarding physiotherapy (N=57)

<i>Positive Comments</i>	No. of comments	%
Friendly / helpful / co-operative	36	40
Got relief from physiotherapy	13	14
Satisfied: with waiting time / with appointment times / with advice/ with diagnosis	12	13
Satisfied with location	5	6
<i>Negative comments</i>		
Condition not better	8	9
Dissatisfied with physiotherapist / Felt rushed / Dissatisfied with diagnosis by physiotherapist	7	8
Not enough consultations / physiotherapist cancelled consultations	7	8
Inconvenient appointment times	2	2
Total	90	100

Positive comments

73% of comments were positive. 40% of comments related to the friendliness of the physiotherapist or the helpfulness of the service. 14% noted that they got relief from the physiotherapy treatment. 13% of comments concerned satisfaction with waiting time, appointment time, advice given or the fact that the problem was diagnosed. Five respondents expressed satisfaction with the service location.

Negative comments

Eight respondents noted that their condition was not better. Seven patients expressed dissatisfaction with the physiotherapist. Seven comments concerned cancelled consultations or not receiving enough consultations. Two patients noted that the appointment times were inconvenient.

DISCUSSION

The objective of the evaluation was to measure patient satisfaction with a practice based physiotherapy service. Review of the literature shows that direct access to physiotherapy for GPs has many benefits including reduced waiting time, reduction in referral to orthopaedics and rheumatology and a lesser likelihood of being referred to other hospital services.

The method used to obtain the information was a self-completion postal questionnaire sent to each patient within the study group following discharge from the service. The postal questionnaire was devised following a qualitative focus group conducted by the researcher with previously discharged patients. The purpose of the focus group was to generate questions for the self-completion postal questionnaire

Patient profile

51% of patients within the survey were aged over 45 years. 60% were female and all were GMS.

Reason for referral

The physiotherapist provided details of reason for referral for each respondent. The principal reason for referral was for an orthopaedic complaint in 46% of cases and for trauma in 31% of cases.

Patient condition

45% of patients experienced their symptoms for greater than six months when they received physiotherapy treatment. 33% had their symptoms for less than one month and 20% of respondents had their symptoms for between 1-6 months. This suggests that up to half of all patients had chronic complaints.

Waiting time

A number of studies have shown that direct access to physiotherapy for GPs reduces waiting time for treatment compared to referral by a consultant. 89% of patients were

seen within 2 weeks. 92% of patients expressed satisfaction with the waiting time. Five patients offered reasons for dissatisfaction with waiting time.

Service location

56% of respondents had received their physiotherapy treatment in a neighbouring doctor's surgery located just a short distance (across a car park) from their own doctor's surgery. 92% of all patients expressed satisfaction with the service location. The six patients who expressed reasons for dissatisfaction with the location were from neighbouring doctor's surgeries.

Patients who attended a neighbouring doctor's surgery for treatment were asked about any problems associated with this. Inconvenience and transport difficulties were the problems identified. Transport difficulties could not have been specific to the location due to the adjacent location of the practices.

Travel

68% of patients walked to the surgery for their treatment. 18% travelled by car and 11% by bus. 77% travelled less than one mile for treatment. 22% travelled between 1 - 4 miles. Just one respondent needed to travel over five miles to the service location. 87% had not experienced any travel difficulties. Eight patients mentioned having to rely on private transport to get to and from the surgery or public transport difficulties. Three patients said that walking home after a treatment session made their condition worse and two patients experienced problems getting in and out of a car after treatment. One patient mentioned difficulty in getting a convenient appointment time.

Patient perceptions and satisfaction with the service

99% of respondents said that the physiotherapist had discussed the physiotherapy condition and the aims of treatment with the patient. 94% said that the physiotherapist had understood their problem. 91% of patients expressed satisfaction with their treatment. Although just nine patients expressed dissatisfaction with treatment, eleven patients offered a reason for dissatisfaction. Reasons for dissatisfaction included ongoing pain, condition not being better or not enough consultations.

Confidence at discharge

73% expressed confidence in managing their condition at discharge.

Patient outcome

14% of patients said that their condition was completely better at discharge. 46% said that their condition had improved a lot while 17% reported a little improvement. 15% of respondents said their condition was the same while 8% said it was worse.

Conclusions

There is now clear evidence that there is a high level of user satisfaction among patients who have attended the practice based physiotherapy service. The service appears highly efficient in terms of reduced waiting time and results in a better outcome for patients. The location of the service is generally perceived as convenient although over half of patients attended from neighbouring doctor's surgeries. It is of some concern that just 73% of respondents expressed confidence in managing their condition at discharge. To summarise, there is a high level of patient satisfaction with service delivery including waiting times, treatment, communication and location. A minority of patients were anxious regarding self-management post-discharge.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the present pilot be continued as an ongoing service.
2. Specific information relating to post-discharge management including a patient information leaflet should be given to patients at discharge. Patients should be invited to ask questions about their management at discharge.
3. Views from the attending physiotherapists regarding patient perception of their discharge management should be sought.

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APPENDIX

Patient satisfaction questionnaire

	<u>Office use only</u>
Number	[]

1. How did you first contact the physiotherapy department at the surgery?

Telephone [] Posted referral letter []

GP made first contact [] Called in []

Other [] Please specify _____

2. How long did you have your symptoms at your first physiotherapy visit?

Less than one week [] Seven to twelve weeks []

One to two weeks [] Three to six months []

Three to four weeks [] More than six months []

Five to six weeks []

3. Did your GP explain the reason for referring you for physiotherapy treatment?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

4. What was the length of time between referral for physiotherapy treatment and your first appointment?

Less than one week [] Seven to twelve weeks []

One to two weeks [] Three to six months []

Three to four weeks [] More than six months []

Five to six weeks []

5. How satisfied were you with this length of waiting time?

Very satisfied [] Dissatisfied []

Mostly Satisfied [] Very dissatisfied []

6. If dissatisfied please state why.

7. Was physiotherapy treatment provided to you in your own doctor's surgery or at a neighbouring doctor's surgery?

Own doctor Neighbouring doctor

8. How satisfied were you with the location of your physiotherapy treatment?

Very satisfied Dissatisfied
Mostly satisfied Very dissatisfied

9. If dissatisfied please state why.

10. If physiotherapy treatment was provided in a neighbouring doctor's surgery did this cause any problems for you?

Yes No

10. (a) comment

11. How far did you have to travel for your treatment?

Less than 1 mile Between three and four miles
Between one and two miles Five miles or more

12. Did travelling for your treatment present any problems to you?

Yes No

13. Comment

14. How did you travel for your physiotherapy treatment?

Car Walked
Bus Other (please specify) _____
Taxi

15. Did your physiotherapist discuss your condition with you?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

16. Did your physiotherapist discuss the aims of treatment with you?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

17. Do you feel your physiotherapist understood your problem?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

18. Were you satisfied with the physiotherapy treatment you received?

Very satisfied [] Dissatisfied []

Mostly Satisfied [] Very dissatisfied []

19. If dissatisfied, please state why.

20. On discharge did you feel confident about how to manage your condition in the future.

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

17. In your opinion is your condition now:

Completely better []

Improved a lot []

Improved a little []

The same []

Worse []

18. If you have anything further to say about physiotherapy, please write your comments below.

Thank you.