International Association of Physiotherapists working with Older People (IPTOP) Education Award Article

I am honoured to be the first recipient of the IPTOP Education Award for the presentation of my research study, Profiling Physical Activity And Sarcopenia Among Older Adults Attending A Physiotherapy Service During The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mixed Methods Study, at the 69th Irish Gerontological Society Annual and Scientific Meeting in November 2022. I completed this research study as part of a Masters in Neurology and Gerontology at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Research Study Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, 26% of Irish people over 70 were inactive [1]. Physical inactivity is expected to increase as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic [2-4]. Insufficient physical activity is also associated with sarcopenia in adults over 60 years of age [5-6]. Little is known about the impact of the pandemic on physical activity and sarcopenia levels among community-dwelling older adults attending a primary care physiotherapy service in Ireland. This mixed-methods study aimed to profile physical activity and sarcopenia levels among older adults attending a primary care physiotherapy service during the pandemic and to explore their experiences of physical activity.

Methods

Adults over 70 years of age attending an urban-based primary care physiotherapy service in Ireland were invited to participate by primary care physiotherapists between September 2021 - January 2022. The inclusion criteria were referral to the physiotherapy service, people $\geq$ 70 years of age, community-dwelling older adults and the participant was willing and able to give informed consent. Exclusion criteria included receiving palliative care and being unable to give informed consent. The quantitative phase of the study was a cross-sectional study profiling physical activity and sarcopenia levels among adults over 70 attending the physiotherapy service. Physical activity and levels of sarcopenia were captured using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire Short Form (IPAQ-SF) and the SARC-F. The qualitative phase involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews to explore community-dwelling older adults' experiences of physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews were conducted with a sample of the quantitative phase and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The Irish College of General Practitioners granted ethical approval.

Results

Fifty-nine participants (35 females) participated in the cross-sectional study (median age 79.3, IQR 12years). Ninety-one percent of participants (n=54) followed cocooning restrictions. Fifty-six percent (n=33) of participants had low physical activity levels (95%CI 43-69%), and 56% (n=33) scored 4 or more on the SARC-F (95%CI 43-69%), which is predictive of sarcopenia. There was a strong negative correlation between the SARC-F and the IPAQ-SF total physical activity (r(Rho)= -0.616, n=59, p<0.001). Ten participants (7 females) completed an interview (median age 75.4, IQR 5years). Four themes emerged; 1) a sudden change in physical activity levels, 2) the impact of cocooning measures on physical activity levels, 3) barriers to physical activity, and 4) enablers of physical activity during the pandemic. Barriers to physical activity included reduced fitness and a lack of awareness of physical activity resources, while family support and reducing COVID-19 restrictions were identified as enablers of physical activity.

Key Opportunities

There is an onus on physiotherapists to support and empower community-dwelling older adults to return to their pre-COVID-19 pandemic physical activity levels. Key opportunities exist to promote

physical activity through Making Every Contact Count (MECC), establishing evidence-based physical activity pathways within the community as part of an interagency approach, and increasing awareness among older adults on the physical activity resources available, ensuring information is accessible to those without internet access.

Conclusion

This study identified low physical activity levels and high levels of sarcopenia among community-dwelling older adults attending a primary care physiotherapy service in Ireland. Participants were uncertain if they would return to their pre-pandemic physical activity levels due to slowness of movement and fear of COVID-19, presenting a public health challenge.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my research supervisor, Louise Keating, my physiotherapy colleagues who recruited participants for the study, and the participants who took part in the research study without whom this study could not been completed. I want to thank the Irish Society of Charted Physiotherapists in Neurology and Gerontology for awarding a research bursary for this study. For further information on this research study, please get in contact Avril Mc Tague at mctaguav@tcd.ie.

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