

PS2.273

Quality indicators to measure physiotherapeutic performance for patients with knee osteoarthritis: an observational study

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Rationale, Aims and Objectives: Osteoarthritis (OA) is a common disease that often leads to pain and disability, due to its predilection for low extremity joints. Physical therapy plays an important role in the conservative management of knee OA. Several studies have shown discordance between physiotherapists' practice and guideline recommendations. This study aimed to measure physiotherapists' guideline adherence to optimal knee OA care. Additionally, physiotherapists' determinants at professional and organizational level were explored.

Method: An electronic survey was performed among 284 Flemish physiotherapists by convenience sampling. The survey was based on a set of quality indicators for the management of knee OA, developed for the Belgian primary healthcare system. Treatment modalities that do not contribute to high quality care were also examined. Descriptive statistics and quality indicator pass rates were calculated. Data were analyzed with SPSS 23.

Results: Compliance to evidence-based quality indicators varied between 27% and 98%. The following quality indicators had pass rates above 80%: education on the importance of exercise, functional and strength training exercise therapy, patient tailored exercise therapy, instruction and evaluation of patients in exercises and referral for sport activities after therapy. For treatment modalities that do not contribute to high quality care, massage (49%) and cold application (24%) were most frequently applied. Female physiotherapists spent more time on giving education on aids and footwear, and teaching self-management strategies. Physiotherapists working in group practices were also more likely to provide advice on footwear and give aerobic exercise training.

Conclusions: This study measured a large variation in physiotherapeutic adherence to quality indicators. Improvement is possible by spending more time on advice on weight loss, self-management strategies and periodic evaluation of exercise therapy. Clear insight into barriers for guideline adherence is needed to develop well-targeted quality improvement strategies.