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Given that China was the initial epicenter for the COVID-19 pandemic, we read with particular interest the article by Dean and colleagues.¹ We constitute the China Council of Physical Therapy Program Directors (CCPTPD), a platform established by directors of physical therapy programs in China that either have received accreditation from the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) or are in the process of doing so.

Historically, physical therapy practiced at an international standard in China is relatively new. We are eager to advance and expand physical therapist practice commensurate with our society's needs across the continuum of care, including public health. These needs are similar to those of other industrialized countries. As the profession is in its infancy in China, there is much to be done. We would like to inform our Western colleagues about our initiatives and reinforce that articles similar to Dean et al¹ are critically important in advancing physical therapist practice in China at this time, from both within and outside the profession. We rely on peer-reviewed literature to advance the profession at the policy and health care systems levels, including China's equivalent of ministries of health and health professional education. There is an urgent need for us to increase the number of physical therapist education programs in order to produce competent practitioners who are especially committed to promoting public health.

Programs at the baccalaureate level with "physical therapy" in the award title were

officially approved by the China Education Commission only in 2017. There are approximately 3000 universities in China, 6 of which have professional physical therapist education programs that to date have been accredited by WCPT. These programs graduate under 300 physical therapists each year. Based on projections from other industrialized countries, however, China needs more than 1 million physical therapists to serve its population of 1.4 billion people. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has constituted a significant challenge to the provision of physical therapy services. Physical therapists are needed not only in the acute hospital settings where few currently practice, but also after patients are discharged into the community to promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles, with due precautions.²

The shortage of highly qualified physical therapists in China will be a persisting issue for some time to come. While in transition, rehabilitation services continue to be led by medical practitioners in rehabilitation medicine who refer to generic rehabilitation therapists. These therapists are graduates from 4-year generic rehabilitation therapy programs, the curricula of which include skills perceived to be practiced by physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists. The notion of generic rehabilitation therapists, however, was dismissed at the global level several decades ago, given the emergence of evidence supporting that each profession has a unique skill set and that not one individual can perform the competencies of all 3 professions. As directors who comprise the CCCTPD, and in the interest of the need for immediate action to increase the number of professional physical therapist education programs to

remediate China's dire shortage, we are amenable to a stopgap measure. Specifically, we support structured bridging courses in which generic rehabilitation therapists can enroll to be upskilled to become qualified physical therapists, so that they meet international standards of practice across clinical settings from the critical care to community care.

In Chinese, the word for "crisis" has 2 characters, 危机, "danger" and "opportunity." Unquestionably, the pandemic is a global crisis; however, we see that there is unlimited opportunity for expediting further development of the physical therapy profession in China. Identifying the challenges and solutions is a step in that direction. These include the lack of qualified physical therapists with advanced graduate degrees with academic positions who can conduct research relevant to China as well as teach evidence-informed professional physical therapy courses. To help relieve this demand, the CCPTPD has considered sharing teaching resources (staff and teaching and learning materials).

In addition, the pandemic has shed light on the paucity of attention that has been allocated to acute care and the cardiorespiratory curriculum. We have advised physical therapist academic programs to revise their curricula to better align with the urgent demand for physical therapy services in China in light of the pandemic.

Correspondingly, we have actively engaged with clinical placement providers to strengthen the cardiorespiratory component and to enhance students' cardiorespiratory

clinical experience, especially in the critical care setting. Another initiative is tele-physical therapy, which has been reported to be effective across a range of clinical settings and thus is being encouraged during the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Tele-physical therapy is now being considered for inclusion into our regularly revised physical therapy curricula. Furthermore, we propose that online lectures and seminars prepared by experienced overseas physical therapy academics and practitioners be financially supported by universities in China and the China Physical Therapy Association, to deliver up-to-date physical therapy theory and practice to the Chinese physical therapy community. This is viewed as an essential means to improve the quality of teaching at universities and in postgraduate continuing professional development courses.⁴

In summary, as members of the China Council of Physical Therapy Program Directors, we strongly support the notion put forth by Dean et al¹ that the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity for further development of physical therapy in China--and likely most other countries based on the profession's historical precedent. The COVID-19 pandemic is a unique opportunity for the profession in China to further demonstrate its worth within the health professions and to the general public, both of which are generally unfamiliar with the physical therapy profession; and to health professional policy makers and ministries of health and education in China. Our challenges and opportunities include:

- (1) Substantially increasing the number of physical therapists in China who are qualified at the international standard.

(2) Ensuring the standards of practice remain high and evidence informed. (3)

Reviewing and updating the curriculum on an ongoing basis to best serve the needs of the Chinese people.

(4) Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning within our academic and clinical physical therapy programs and postgraduate professional development programs.

(5) Encouraging inclined physical therapists to pursue doctoral degrees and become educators and researchers.

Despite its wreaking havoc globally, COVID-19 might ultimately lead to the revamping of physical therapy services, teaching, and research around the world, including China. For example, we now better appreciate our responsibility as health professionals to consider the care continuum extending to public health and minimizing the impact of unexpected future domestic and global health crises.

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