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Editorial

Physiotherapists should consider joining an ethics review committee

Mark R Elkins

Editor, *Journal of Physiotherapy*

In various countries, physiotherapists have reported improvements in the academic research culture of the profession,¹ innovations in support for researchers,^{2,3} greater success at securing research funding⁴ and expanding scientific output.⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that clinical physiotherapy research is accumulating rapidly.^{6,7} For example, over 35 000 randomised trials of physiotherapy interventions have been indexed on the PEDro website (Figure 1) and over 1500 diagnostic test accuracy studies relevant to physiotherapy clinical practice have been indexed on the DiTA website (Figure 2). Presumably, there is similarly marked growth in other forms of clinical physiotherapy research such as prospective cohort studies and qualitative research. Clinical research studies like these require approval by an ethics review committee, so physiotherapists must realise that their profession also ought to be making an increasing contribution to reviewing the ethical aspects of research proposals.

The membership of an ethics review committee should span a range of areas of expertise. For example, the Australian National Health & Medical Research Council's guidance⁸ about the composition of an ethics review committee states that it should include at a minimum: a chairperson, two researchers, a person who performs a pastoral care role, a lawyer, two lay people and 'a person with knowledge of, and current experience in, the professional care, counselling or treatment of people; for example, a nurse or allied health professional'. Physiotherapists without extensive research experience should therefore not assume that they are ineligible.

Poorly planned research that is liable to produce misleading results is unethical,⁹ so in addition to the committee composition listed above, the inclusion of a biostatistician has also been recommended.^{9,10} Physiotherapists with research experience, a strong understanding of research design issues, and/or statistical expertise may be able to make contributions from multiple perspectives.

Some physiotherapists may want to conduct research but do not have the time and/or confidence to design a study, complete the approval processes, conduct the research and disseminate the findings. By joining an ethics review committee, those physiotherapists may be able to contribute to the research effort in a different – but no less valuable – way.¹¹ It would also be an opportunity to improve their understanding of research design, consider ethical issues in research and learn of researchers in their local area with whom they might collaborate at some point in the future.

Lack of opportunity seems unlikely to be a barrier to physiotherapists serving as an ethics review committee member. Most hospitals and universities have an ethics review board¹² and calls for greater involvement of clinicians are common.¹¹ Joining a committee will help to share the load, so that all committee members can do a more thorough job.

Two years ago, I joined my institution's ethics review committee. The committee is very well organised and the standard of the research proposals that are considered is generally very high. At that time, I undertook an ethics training course, which was very helpful.

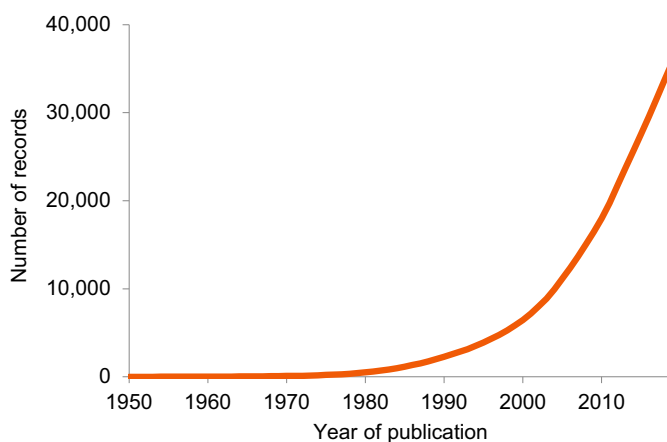


Figure 1. Accumulation of randomised trials of physiotherapy interventions on the PEDro database.

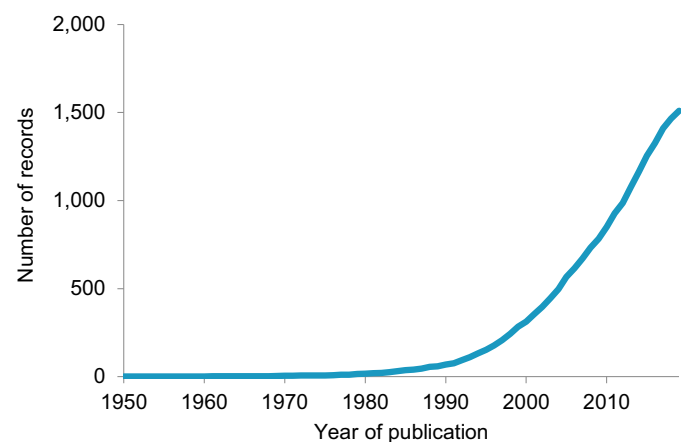


Figure 2. Accumulation of studies of diagnostic test accuracy relevant to clinical physiotherapy on the DiTA database.

The wisdom, enthusiasm and diligence shown by the committee members has been inspirational. Serving on the committee has therefore been rewarding and enjoyable. There have been many opportunities to contribute a physiotherapy perspective to the committee's deliberations: identifying that the proposed range of physical outcome testing was unfeasible; discussing published physiotherapy research that had implications for a proposal; clarifying terminology that was unfamiliar to the other committee members; and identifying that the experimental intervention might impinge on another profession's ability to continue delivering established, effective interventions to a patient.

Reading proposals for the monthly meetings of the ethics committee is time consuming but it is also interesting and enjoyable. Recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many new and urgent research proposals were received. Furthermore, rapid modifications were required to many of the existing research projects that had been approved by the ethics committee previously. To address this, the committee met weekly instead of monthly for a period of time. In general, however, the workload is not unduly onerous.

In summary, physiotherapists do not have to be experts in clinical research methodology to be a valuable ethics review committee member. What they need is enough common sense and interest to gain an understanding of a given research proposal. From there, they can assist the applicants to refine their proposal, where necessary, into one with a robust design that addresses the relevant ethical concerns. Ethics committee membership is a role that would benefit from the involvement of more physiotherapists.

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Correspondence: Mark Elkins, Centre for Education & Workforce Development, Sydney Local Health District, Australia. Email: mark.elkins@sydney.edu.au

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PEDro www.pedro.org.au

DiTA dita.org.au