

AWARENESS OF ROLE OF UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN PHYSIOTHERAPY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize global health, equity, and sustainable development. Physiotherapists, as frontline health professionals, have a vital role in promoting health and well-being across populations. However, awareness of the SDGs within the physiotherapy profession remains underexplored, particularly among senior professionals. **Aim:** This study aimed to explore the awareness and perceptions of the role of SDGs in physiotherapy practice among physiotherapists with over ten years of experience in academic and clinical settings. **Materials and Methods:** A self-constructed Likert-type questionnaire was developed to assess participants' awareness, perceived relevance, and integration of SDG principles in physiotherapy practice. The tool comprised domains addressing knowledge of the SDGs, perceived responsibility of physiotherapists toward sustainable development, and the application of SDG-related practices in academic and clinical contexts. Data were collected from purposively selected physiotherapists (n = 50) engaged in both academic and clinical portfolios. **Results:** Of the 50 physiotherapists surveyed, awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was moderate, with 42% demonstrating adequate knowledge. Positive attitudes were more prominent, with 70% agreeing that physiotherapists have a responsibility to contribute to the SDGs. However, only 31% perceived that SDG principles were effectively integrated into their academic or clinical practice. **Conclusion:** Senior physiotherapists are more in line with health-related goals and show some awareness of the SDGs. To strengthen the role of physiotherapists in accomplishing the SDGs, professional development curriculum integration and advocacy must be improved.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Development, Health Equity, Public Health, Patient Care.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 represent a worldwide appeal to improve health equity and the environment while eradicating poverty. economic success by 2030.^[1] Health care providers are acknowledged as crucial contributors to these goals, especially in lowering inequality and promoting health and well-being (SDG 3). Supporting high-quality education (SDG 4) and promoting (SDG 10)^[2] Physiotherapists in the context of recovery. And movement specialists contribute in a special way to the enhancement of population health.

Numerous SDGs are directly and indirectly impacted by physiotherapy. One example would be interventions. Intended to promote disability inclusion and rehabilitation are in line with SDGs three and ten. Fair participation in society and access to health care.^[3] The same is true for physiotherapy. By encouraging future practitioners to embrace sustainable practices, academics help achieve SDG four. Health behaviours and international viewpoints.^[4] Evidence, however, indicates that knowledge of the. Healthcare providers' approach to the SDGs varies, with a particular emphasis on health-related objectives. There is little focus on other related goals. ^[5] Acknowledgment of their possible contribution to the achievement of other objectives like lowering inequality (SDG 10) and guaranteeing high-quality education (SDG 4).^[1,2] Physiotherapists with over a decade of practice offer unique insights into how the profession has grown and how it fits into broader health and development plans. This study aims to examine the knowledge and views about the SDGs' importance in physiotherapy work. Physiotherapists, by virtue of their work in rehabilitation, community health, and academic training,^[6] are strategically positioned to influence sustainable health systems. However, without adequate awareness and understanding of the SDGs, the profession risks underutilizing its capacity to address global health and development priorities.

METHODS

Study design

This study used a qualitative-descriptive approach with a structured self-constructed Likert-type questionnaire containing closed-ended questions. The quantitative Likert responses provide a structured profile of awareness in depth.

Study setting and participants

Participants were registered/licensed physiotherapists currently working in both academic and clinical portfolios with more than 10 years of cumulative professional experience were included. Participants were recruited from 2 tertiary hospitals, 2 private clinics, and 3 academic institutions across Pimpri-Chinchwad area, Pune. Maharashtra, India to capture diverse institutional contexts.

Inclusion criteria

Registered physiotherapist to Indian Association of Physiotherapists (IAP) and Maharashtra Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy Council (OTPT) with more than 10 years of academic and clinical experience after post-graduate qualification were sampled, currently engaged in both academic, teaching, and clinical practice roles. Physiotherapists willing and able to provide informed consent and participate in the questionnaire and with sufficient proficiency in the study language to complete the questionnaire and respond to Closed-ended questions. The participants partially working in a team of internal quality assurance cell of either at college level or at university level, participants who were sensitized session about implementations of UN-SDG in curriculum.

Exclusion criteria

Physiotherapists with only academic or only clinical roles after Undergraduate degree with less than 10 years of professional experience, Retired or non-practicing physiotherapists, unwilling to provide informed consent.

Participant information

Sociodemographic and professional variables were collected from all participants. Mean age of study participants was 42.5 ± 2 years, with mean professional expertise of 16.2 ± 1.2 years. Out of total 50 participants 28 were female and 22 were male physiotherapists, out of 50, 13 were doctoral fellows and remaining 37 were perusing Ph.D. Thirty participants were professors, and 20 were associate professors. Ten participants were specialised in Physiotherapy in Neurosciences, 15 from orthopaedics, 15 from community-based rehabilitation and 10 from cardio-respiratory sciences.

Out of fifty, 26 participants were from private university and remaining 24 from state government university. All participants were priorly exposed to SDG training or institutional SDG initiatives.(Table no 1)

Sampling strategy and recruitment

A purposive maximum-variation sampling strategy was be to identify experienced physiotherapists who meet the inclusion criteria, ensuring representation across geographic regions, institution types, and clinical specialties.

Recruitment was facilitated through professional networks, university/departmental contact lists, and professional associations. Snowballing was done to identify additional eligible participants. However, no additional participants were added.

Instrument development (30-item self-constructed questionnaire)

A self-constructed questionnaire was developed to assess physiotherapists' awareness and perceptions of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in relation to professional practice. The tool consisted of 30 primary items divided into three domains: Knowledge, Attitude, and Perception, with ten items in each domain. Knowledge items explored participants' familiarity with the SDGs and their specific relevance to rehabilitation and physiotherapy.

Attitude items examined the value participants placed on integrating SDG principles into practice, teaching, and advocacy. Perception items assessed the extent to which participants believed SDG-related activities were embedded in their professional roles and institutions. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Content and face validity were established through expert review by senior physiotherapists and public health academics, while pilot testing with a small sample of eligible physiotherapists ensured clarity, relevance, and internal consistency of the instrument.

Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the institutional Sub Ethics Committee (DYPCPT/ISCE/06/2024). After obtaining written information consent participants were enrolled for the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. A questionnaire was circulated through google-form for selected participants and their e-signature was obtained on the consent.

RESULTS

Knowledge domain

Awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was variable. 60% of participants correctly identified SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) as most relevant to physiotherapy, while only 34% were able to mention at least two other goals related to the profession (e.g., SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities). Familiarity with official UN/WHO documents linking rehabilitation to the SDGs was reported by 26% of participants. Overall, the mean proportion of positive responses across the 10 knowledge items was 42%, indicating moderate but incomplete awareness.

Attitude domain

Most participants expressed favourable attitudes toward the integration of SDG principles in physiotherapy. 80% agreed that physiotherapists have a professional responsibility to contribute to the SDGs, while 72% supported embedding SDG-related content in physiotherapy curricula. Willingness to engage in advocacy activities was reported by 66%, whereas 54% highlighted workload and time constraints as barriers. The overall mean proportion of positive responses for this domain was 70%, reflecting generally positive orientations with some practical limitations.

Perception/Practice domain

Fewer participants reported actual integration of SDG-related practices in their institutions. Only 38% indicated that their workplace had SDG-related policies or initiatives. About 32% reported incorporating SDG concepts into their teaching, and 30% engaged in interdisciplinary collaborations linked to SDG goals. Adequacy of institutional resources was rated low, with only 24% agreeing that their workplace was well-equipped to support SDG-oriented programs. The mean proportion of positive responses across this domain was 31%, reflecting a notable gap between positive attitudes and actual implementation. (Table no 2)

Table no. 1: Sociodemographic and Professional Characteristics of participants (n=50).

Variable	Mean and SD
Age (In years)	42.5±2
Professional Experience(In years)	16.2±1.2
Gender	22
Male	
Female	28
Academic Status	
Doctoral Fellows	13
Perusing Ph.D.	37
Designation	
Professor	30
Associate Professor	20
Specialization	
Neurosciences	10
Musculoskeletal Disorders	15
Cardio-Respiratory Sciences	15
Community-Bases Rehabilitation	10
Institution Type	
Private	24
State Government University	26

Table no 2: Scores in percentages for responses in knowledge, Attitude and perception domain (n=50).

Domain	Variable	Response (%)
Knowledge	Identified SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-being) as most relevant	60%
	Mentioned ≥ 2 additional relevant SDGs (e.g., SDG 4, SDG 10)	34%
	Familiar with UN/WHO documents linking rehabilitation to SDGs	26%
	Mean positive responses (overall knowledge)	42%
Attitude	Agree physiotherapists have responsibility toward SDGs	80%
	Support inclusion of SDGs in curriculum	72%
	Willing to engage in advocacy activities	66%
	Report workload/time as barriers	54%
	Mean positive responses (overall attitude)	70%
Perception / Practice	Workplace has SDG-related policies/initiatives	38%
	Incorporate SDG concepts into teaching	32%
	Engage in interdisciplinary SDG collaborations	30%
	Workplace adequately resourced for SDG programs	24%
	Mean positive responses (overall practice)	31%

DISCUSSION

This study explored the awareness, attitudes, and perceptions of physiotherapists with over 10 years of professional experience regarding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results showed that although 70% of participants have generally positive attitudes toward the incorporation of SDGs into physiotherapy but their perceptions of practical integration (31 percent) and knowledge (42 percent) were relatively low. These findings which also show a pattern in the larger healthcare literature point to a difference between positive orientations and actual implementation.

The study's relatively low knowledge levels are in line with reports that SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) are commonly recognized by healthcare professionals including rehabilitation specialists but they are not as familiar as with other pertinent goals like SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).^[7] Dean et al, similarly noted that while physiotherapists acknowledge their contribution to global health, structured awareness of global frameworks remains insufficient.^[8] In contrast, a study by Gupta et al, emphasized that strengthening rehabilitation workforce capacity is integral to achieving multiple SDGs, suggesting that physiotherapists could play a more significant role if awareness gaps are addressed through professional education and policy support.^[9]

The strong positive attitudes found in this study align with previous research showing that physiotherapists value their role in health promotion and sustainable health practices.^[3-5] Participants' belief that SDG principles should be incorporated into curricula resonates with calls from the World Health Organization (WHO) and professional bodies to embed sustainable development in health education.^[10] However, the practical integration of SDG principles into physiotherapy practice and institutional policy was notably low (31%). This finding contrasts with studies in high-income contexts where institutional initiatives have begun to align rehabilitation services with sustainable development strategies.^[11] Barriers such as workload, lack of resources, and limited institutional support identified in this study echo earlier findings by Cieza et al, who noted systemic challenges in embedding rehabilitation into broader health systems.^[12]

An important implication of this study is the disconnect between professional willingness and institutional readiness.

While physiotherapists demonstrated clear interest in engaging with the SDGs, structural and policy-level barriers hindered translation into practice. This underscores the need for organizational and governmental policies that explicitly recognize rehabilitation as a driver of sustainable development. Previous studies in global health education highlight that without systemic reinforcement, individual motivation alone is insufficient to achieve large-scale alignment with the SDGs.^[13] Therefore, advocacy at both institutional and policy-making levels is required to ensure that the rehabilitation sector is fully integrated into national development strategies.

Future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples, including early-career physiotherapists and students, to capture generational differences in SDG awareness and practice. Mixed-methods or longitudinal designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how awareness evolves and how training or institutional initiatives impact professional engagement with the SDGs over time. Furthermore, the evolution of tools for evaluating the contributions of health professionals to the SDGs that have been validated and standardized. Knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours would enhance the comparability of studies.^[14] Finally, but also it is critical to collaborate with trade associations and academic institutions of legislators. Continuous development of targeted interventions, such as curriculum integration, is recommended. policies and professional development initiatives that strengthen physiotherapists' alignment with the International Sustainable Development Agenda.

CONCLUSION

According to this study, physiotherapists with over ten years of experience have a moderate knowledge of 42 percent and a very positive attitude of 70 percent regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN, but they seem to have very little practice integrating these principles i.e., 31 percent. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) is well known, but few people know about other important goals like Quality Education and Reduced Inequalities. It is evident from the results that there is a disconnect between institutional or systemic support and professional will.

Targeted tactics are required to enhance physiotherapists' contributions to the 2030 Agenda, such as curriculum integration, ongoing professional development, and policy-level projects that incorporate rehabilitation into frameworks for sustainable development. By closing these gaps, physiotherapists can better support disability inclusion, health equity, and more general sustainable development goals.

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