Letter to the Editor

Importance of Health Policy and Systems Research for Strengthening Rehabilitation in Health Systems

A Call to Action to Accelerate Progress

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*From the American Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (WRF); Rehabilitation Programme, World Health Organization (WDG); World Health Organization Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (AG); and The Health Policy and Systems Research for Rehabilitation Group (Editors-in-Chief of collaborating journals listed in alphabetical order): Iben Axen, DC, PhD (Chiropractic and Manual Therapies), Muhammad Ehab Azim, DPT, MS-NMPT (Foundation University Journal of Rehabilitation Sciences), Linamara Battistella, MD, PhD (Acta Fisiatrica), Kristian Borg, MD, PhD (Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine), Ines Campos, MD, MSc (Portuguese Journal of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine), Rodrigo Castro, MD (Revista Colombiana de Medicina Fisica y Rehabilitacion), Joaquim Chaler, MD, PhD (Rehabilitación), Leighton Chan, MD, MPH (Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation), Ignacio Devesa, MD (Revista Mexicana de Medicina Fisica y Rehabilitacion), Deniz Evcik, MD (Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation), Giorgio Ferriero, MD, PhD (European Journal of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine), Gerard E. Francisco, MD (The Journal of the International Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine), Simon French, PhD (Chiropractic and Manual Therapies), Steven A. Gard, PhD (Journal of Prosthetics and Orthotics), Douglas P. Gross, PhD, BScPT (Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation), Matthieu Guemann, PT, PhD (European Rehabilitation Journal), Louise Gustafsson, PhD (Australian Occupational Therapy Journal), Allen Heinemann, PhD (Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation), Claire D. Johnson, DC, PhD (Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics), Frank Kandziora, MD, PhD (Brain and Spine), Carlotte Kiekens, MD (Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences), Jae-Young Lim, MD, PhD (Annals of Geriatric Medicine and Research), Thorsten Meyer, PhD (Die Rehabilitation), Peggy Nelson, PhD (Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research), Randolph J. Nudo, PhD (Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair), Tamara Owensworth, PhD (Executive Editor - Neuropsychological Rehabilitation), Wilco Peul, MD, PhD (Brain and Spine), Farooq Azam Rathore, MD, MSc (Section Editor - Journal of Pakistan Medical Association), Stefano Respizzi, MD (Medicina Riabilitativa), Christine Rolland, PhD (Revue Santé Publique), Carla Sabariego, PhD (Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences), Furqan Ahmed Siddiqi, DPT, PhD (Foundation University Journal of Rehabilitation Sciences), Manoj Sivan, MD (Advances in Rehabilitation Science and Practice), Birkan Sonel Tur, MD (Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation), Henk J. Stam, MD, PhD (Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine), Aimee Stewart, PhD (South African Journal of Physiotherapy) (HPSRRG).

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In recent decades, the field of rehabilitation has undergone substantial development, growth, and acceptance. Rehabilitation addresses the impact of health conditions on a person’s daily life by optimizing their functioning and reducing their disability experience. Rehabilitation expands the focus of health beyond preventative and curative care to ensure that people with health conditions can remain as independent as possible and participate in education, work, and meaningful life roles. A research definition of rehabilitation has been recently published. Scientific and clinical research has generated a body of knowledge that strongly supports the use of many rehabilitation interventions with positive outcomes in various populations and health conditions.

We also have a better understanding of the growing global needs, demands, and recognition of rehabilitation worldwide. For example, an estimated 2.41 billion people globally could benefit from rehabilitation services. Thus, at least one in every three persons worldwide will require rehabilitation at some point during the course of their disease or injury. This figure has most likely increased because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The need for rehabilitation increased by 63% between 1990 and 2017 because of the aging population, the increasing prevalence of noncommunicable health conditions, and the shifting epidemiological profile in most countries.

Finally, the 2022 Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities reported that approximately 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the world’s population, have moderate to severe levels of disability associated with underlying health conditions and impairments. Now more than ever before, it is crucial that rehabilitation is available and accessible to populations globally according to their needs. The important contribution of rehabilitation to functioning, including social and occupational participation, and the well-being of populations worldwide, can no longer be denied or delayed.

Rehabilitation is critical for the attainment of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 3, ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.’

However, there continues to be a high unmet need for rehabilitation globally, with some low- and middle-income countries reporting unmet needs in up to 50% of people who could benefit from rehabilitation. Rehabilitation services are not accessible to many people worldwide. Many people in need do not have access because of failure, at least partially, to effectively plan rehabilitation services. Many nations and health systems have not implemented policy measures that recognize rehabilitation as an essential component of universal health coverage. Health policy, planning, and decision-making for rehabilitation often require more local evidence to adequately plan, finance, implement, and monitor quality rehabilitation services, including infrastructure and workforce, to make services accessible to those in need.

The field of health policy and systems research (HPSR) seeks to understand and improve how societies organize themselves to achieve collective health goals and how different actors interact in the policy and implementation processes to contribute to policy outcomes. This field is an interdisciplinary blend of medicine and health sciences, economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, law sciences, public health, and epidemiology that together draw a comprehensive picture of how health systems respond and adapt to health policies and how health policies can shape—and be shaped—by health systems and the broader determinants of health. The importance of HPSR for rehabilitation has been recently highlighted with robust data that must be considered and used by the health policy and systems community and leadership. HPSR for rehabilitation generates the evidence needed by policymakers to make appropriate decisions and to develop action plans to enhance the capacity of the health system to serve the population in need of rehabilitation services. For example, the evidence generated by HPSR helps (1) establish priorities for delivering rehabilitation services; (2) evaluate the outcomes of various rehabilitation interventions relative to the levels of care in the health system; (3) identify specific benefits to society justifying those decisions; and (4) strengthen health systems to increase access, quality, and provision of health services for rehabilitation. Supported by the recent resolution on ‘Strengthening rehabilitation in health systems’
endorsed by the World Health Assembly for the first time in the history of the World Health
Organization, it is time to leverage HPSR to support societal health goals as they apply to
rehabilitation.

In 2022, the World Health Organization Rehabilitation Program established the World Rehabilitation
Alliance (WRA) to strengthen networks and partnerships that advocate the integration of
rehabilitation into health systems. The WRA is a World Health Organization-hosted global network of
stakeholders whose mission and mandate are to support the implementation of the Rehabilitation 2030
Initiative through advocacy activities. The WRA focuses on promoting rehabilitation as an essential
health service integral to Universal Health Coverage and the realization of the United Nations’
Sustainable Development Goal 3. The WRA is divided into five workstreams: workforce, primary
care, emergencies, external relations, and research. This research workstream is dedicated to the
generation and routine use of HPSR evidence to plan and integrate rehabilitation into health
care systems. The specific objectives of this study are to advocate for (1) the demand for and utilization of
HPSR evidence for rehabilitation; (2) the widespread generation of high-quality HPSR evidence for
rehabilitation; and (3) the publication, dissemination, and implementation of HPSR evidence for
rehabilitation.

In this context, the coauthors of this editorial, on behalf of their respective academic journals, express
their full support for the WRA’s mission in general and the specific objectives of the research
workstream. We commit that our journals, as much as possible, will implement one or more of the
following actions: (1) invite researchers in the field of HPSR for rehabilitation to submit their
manuscripts to our journals for peer review and publication; (2) create a special journal section, series,
or designation dedicated to HPSR for rehabilitation; (3) appoint editorial board members with
expertise in HPSR for rehabilitation; and (4) disseminate research articles among funding agencies
and policymakers. These actions by our academic journals will help the WRA achieve its goal of
strengthening rehabilitation services for all.