

Physiotherapists have a major role in Environmental Health

Alexandre Kubicki¹

¹Université de Franche-Comté, UR LINC 481, F-25000 Besançon, France

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Physiotherapists and occupational therapists focus on the overall function of patients rather than just on their disease(s). As rehabilitation professionals, they treat pain, instabilities and disabilities, with the aim of enhancing the participation of patients. They also work with healthy people to avoid or delay the arrival of impairments to the musculoskeletal system. With this global approach, centralised on the physiological reserves of our body, physiotherapy can easily comply with the “One Health” concept.

“One Health” is defined by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention as a “collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach, working at the local-regional-national and global levels, with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes recognising the interconnection between people, animals, plants and their shared environment” [1]. Among the key factors of well-being, our environment forms the basis. The shadow of climate change is growing. In just a few years, the concept of environmental health has become widely accepted. Environmental health is a branch of public health, which focuses on the health effects of human interactions with the environment. It is a multidisciplinary field that studies how the environment affects the health and well-being of individuals and populations, and – in a minor part – how the health system contributes to climate change. The term environmental health is broad and includes air pollution, water pollution, hazardous waste, climate change, and other environmental issues.

Environmental health researchers and professionals aim to prevent diseases caused by environmental factors, developing strategies oriented towards two main goals: human health itself (preventing behaviours) and environmental protection (reducing the impact of environmental factors on human health). Indeed, environmental protection is a major key to protecting human health, since a high number of health determinants are dependent on the quality of air, water, soil, food, etc. [2].

With the environmental health concept in mind, we can take into consideration the numerous co-benefits that arise when we plan health and environment protection together [3]. As rehabilitation professional or sports instructors, we can lead this movement, as we understand the mutual benefits of encouraging patients to move or to be active. We can reduce Greenhouse Gas (GG) emissions caused by our displacements by travelling, when possible, by foot or bicycle [4]. Moving actively, we protect ourselves against several diseases (cardiovascular

or neurodegenerative, for example) [5, 6, 7]. From an individual point of view, what is positive for one’s health is also beneficial for the environment, and conversely. In addition, walking or cycling instead of driving a car also avoids pollution for the local community. Therefore, when we protect ourselves, we also protect humanity.

We can also cite nutrition since physiotherapists also play a role in the promotion of dietary behaviours. Modifying dietary behaviours such as decreasing meat consumption is efficient in reducing GG emissions, thus protecting the environment [8]. In addition, this dietary change could also contribute to reducing the risk of developing several cancers [9].

As health professionals, we must integrate the notion that our health begins by nature’s health, as we are nature [10]. In France, the health system is responsible for 8% of the GG emissions [4]. The huge priority given to pharmaceutical solutions (i.e. medication) is probably a key factor. Chemical treatments are often necessary, and we continue to expect further progress to treat certain diseases this way. However, medications are over-consumed worldwide. In this context, rehabilitation professional could help reduce the consumption of Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), for example [11]. Although the pharmaceutical industry is responsible for a major part of GG emissions, health professionals should also recognise their collective responsibility in the environmental destruction, and the consequences for their patient’s health.

We ask patients to be “active” during their rehabilitation, whereas effort should be an internal motivation for each of us in all stages of life. When we perform tasks actively, we understand how much energy is required to perform each task. Taking stairs for example, instead of using the elevator is the beginning of this change that could improve health and a reduce energy consumption.

Several physiotherapists are aware of this important issue and have formed the Environmental Physiotherapy Association [12]. They empower a network of physiotherapy clinicians, educators, researchers, and students interested in exploring and advancing the field of environmental physiotherapy. It is time for us all to join this kind of dynamic.

Whom better than rehabilitation professional to impulse this paradigm change in our health systems?

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Alexandre Kubicki, PT, PhD, Université de Franche-Comté, UR LINC 481, F-25000 Besançon, France Email: alexandre.kubicki@univ-fcomte.fr

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