APTANJ Scholarship Entry
The role of physical therapy during the opioid crisis in New Jersey

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Over recent decades, the opioid crisis in New Jersey has increased in severity due to many different factors. The factor which is most relevant to physical therapists is how pain is managed by patients and doctors and the rampant prescription of opioid pain medication for chronic conditions, post-operative care, and more (Widespread). Consequently, this can open the door for patients to get addicted to opioid drugs; an addiction that will affect them long after their prescription runs out. Physical therapists have a unique role in the opioid crisis. Physical therapy is a leading choice for drug-free pain management for both chronic and acute pain (CDC), with varied treatment plans and interventions to fit many patients’ needs. Physical therapists’ main roles in the opioid crisis are to address drug-free pain management, provide patient support, and rehabilitate patients for optimal function.

The first of three roles that physical therapists serve in the opioid crisis is arguably the most obvious. Drug-free pain management is, for many people, a very enticing aspect of physical therapy. Therapists are equipped to use a combination of modalities, manual manipulations, therapeutic exercises, and patient education to reduce or eliminate pain from a person’s daily activities. Patients who experience chronic pain may turn to physical therapy to learn to manage their pain symptoms without relying on prescription medications. Patients who are recovering from acute conditions or surgery can utilize physical therapy to recover quicker, thus lessening the amount of time they will experience pain. Eliminating the need for pain medication altogether is the ultimate goal, and a
A physical therapist can provide the tools necessary to create a long-lasting pain management plan to fit the patient’s needs.

Another way physical therapists help combat the opioid crisis in New Jersey is through providing support to patients following an injury or surgery. Building a rapport with a patient begins at the very first introduction and never loses its importance. Consistency and trust between a patient and the physical therapist can provide many opportunities for the therapist to become a system of support for the patient in a time when they might feel insecure or upset about their health condition. Patients might see a primary care physician, surgeon, or specialist for a check up once a month or so, but they see their physical therapist typically two to three times a week. During physical therapy sessions, conversations with the patient help to monitor the patient’s progress and alert the therapist to any red flags or changes in the patient’s condition. While a physical therapist may choose to continue to treat a patient who might be becoming dependent on their prescription pain medication (Sisola), it is outside the scope of a physical therapist’s job to alter or prescribe medications. Alternatively, it is certainly the therapist’s ethical duty to refer the patient to the appropriate medical professional for help (Code). Physical therapy sessions can also give patients the time needed to have an honest and open dialogue with a physical therapist who will listen, document, and take the appropriate steps to help his or her patient safely recover from an accident or illness. Whether that means educating the patient on home exercises to complete to facilitate a speedy recovery or referring the patient to another medical professional who would be more suitable for the condition, physical therapists are fiercely dedicated to doing anything within their scope to help a patient heal quickly and safely.
One final way that physical therapists play a role in the opioid crisis is by assisting their patients to return to their prior level of function, or as close as they can get. Following an injury or onset of an illness, one of the most frustrating aspects for patients is often the inability to participate in activities they enjoy. The activities that bring them joy, such as a hobby, or provide them with meaning, such as their job, can be taken away after injury. Even though physical therapy is a long journey for many people, the combination of a drug-free plan of care and the support provided by a physical therapist can make that journey a lot easier and safer. The faster a patient can return to their normal daily life, the happier they will be. While pain medications can be a quick fix, they will never be a valid long-term solution for the patient’s symptoms. Physical therapy, on the other hand, can help patients meet goals along the way to recovery without the risk of dependency to opioids.

Physical therapy is an ever-evolving profession with endless ways of helping people. In the wake of an opioid crisis plaguing the state of New Jersey, a new focus has been brought to the career of physical therapy as people turn to safer ways of healing their bodies that do not involve drugs. The role of physical therapy within this crisis is multifaceted, and it is most efficient if all aspects are utilized simultaneously. Fortunately, the ethical standard to which physical therapists hold themselves ensures the proper attention and care provided to every patient that walks into their office (Code). A plan of care, which encompasses interventions and support, is the root of physical therapy and a viable alternative to the treatment of pain symptoms (CDC). As this crisis has touched just about every person in New Jersey one way or another, it is easy to see how physical therapists can expend their role in addressing this crisis. As long as the opioid epidemic exists, the
field of physical therapy will continue to evolve to provide patients with care without the risk of opioid dependency.
References

"CDC Recommends Physical Therapy and Other Nondrug Options for Chronic Pain."

