



## EDITORIAL

# Non-communicable diseases are the biggest challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: What is the physiotherapist's role in global health?



In this increasingly globalised world, we are facing new challenges; particularly in the form of major non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular disease, chronic pulmonary disease, diabetes and cancer [1]. Even though the main risk factors have been identified (tobacco and alcohol use, physical inactivity and unhealthy diet), the epidemic of NCDs has neither been stopped nor slowed [1]. The treatment approach to NCDs requires a move from providing a cure for individual patients towards the prevention of illness in an entire population [2]. In order to respond to this paradigm shift from an illness model to a wellness model, health professionals need to adjust their goals and strategies, as well as rethink their interactions with clients [2]. Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, considers this health challenge to be an opportunity for the global community "to change the course of the NCD epidemic" [1]. Physiotherapists can and should contribute to become agents of change [2] as they are in an excellent position to tackle some of the NCD risk factors and improve mobility, function and lifestyle for a population.

In this current issue of the *Hong Kong Physiotherapy Journal*, Abaraogu et al [3] report the results of a cross-sectional survey in Nigeria aiming at determining physiotherapists' practices about and barriers to diet counseling. The authors argue that physiotherapists' expertise should include "health-focused practices" rather than only providing "treatment of disability and illness" [3] which goes in line with the global approach to NCD. However, the reality is not so bright: 64% of the surveyed Nigerian physiotherapists rarely assess patients' dietary habits and if advice is given it is usually done verbally only. On a more positive note, physiotherapists believe that diet counseling is important and regularly enquire about family history of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. The study further identified various

barriers to diet counseling: lack of access to diet counsellors, lack of patient education material, lack of expertise and uncertainty about the provision of services to this group.

NCDs are the hallmark of our globalized world and are partially caused by factors over which individuals have limited control. We continuously need to remind ourselves that (a) individual's health status is determined by multiple factors, (b) a person's lifestyle impacts on health, and (c) factors such as housing, community networks or the environment play an important role for a person to remain healthy [5]. The first step to meet the global healthcare needs is to increase awareness on what physiotherapists can do and how they can promote healthy lifestyle for the local population [4]. In addition, much of physiotherapy research is done in high-income countries, yet we know that the body, health and illness, as well as roles within the healthcare system are culturally constructed and context-dependent [4]. Global health problems require a shift in the ways physiotherapy research and practice is done. Much can be learned from how other countries engage in healthcare and thereby better understand physiotherapy as a culturally adapted practice.

## References

- [1] WHO. Global status report on non-communicable diseases. 2014. Access: [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/148114/1/9789241564854\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/148114/1/9789241564854_eng.pdf?ua=1).
- [2] Higgs J, Hunt A, Higgs C, Neubauer D. Physiotherapy education in the changing international healthcare and educational contexts. *Adv Physiother* 1999;1:17–26.
- [3] Abaraogu UO, Ogaga MO, Odidika E, Frantz J. Promotion of healthy nutrition in clinical practice: a cross-sectional survey of practices and barriers among physiotherapists in southeast Nigeria. *Hong Kong Physiotherapy Journal* 2016;35:21–9.

Conflicts of interest: There is no conflict of interest to declare

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hkpj.2016.10.002>

1013-7025/Copyright © 2016, Hong Kong Physiotherapy Association. Published by Elsevier (Singapore) Pte Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

- 
- [4] Wickford J, Duttine A. Answering global health needs in low-income countries: Considering the role of physical therapists. *World Med Health Policy* 2013;5(2):141–60.
- [5] Marmot M, Wilkinson RG. *Social determinants of health*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: University Press; 2006.

Veronika Schoeb, PhD  
*Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, The Hong Kong  
Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*