

Proficiency and Ethical Standards: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Postgraduate Physical Therapy Students at RCRS, Lahore

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¹ Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work for the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work, ² Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content, ³ Final approval of the version to be published, ⁴ Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved

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Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of healthcare, the concept of medical professionalism weaves together technical expertise with ethical responsibility. It's more than just proficiency; it's about integrating the art and science of medicine to serve patients with excellence and integrity.¹ At its core lie principles prioritizing patient well-being, autonomy, and societal equity—a guiding light for healthcare practitioners worldwide, as

A B S T R A C T

Background: Accepting the levels of professionalism that are currently in place not only provides a baseline for promoting development through educational and professional growth approaches, but also helps to make improved professionalization possible by focusing on individual and professional-related factors.

Objective: to assess the professionalism of candidates pursuing a postgraduate degree in physical therapy.

Methodology: A cross-sectional investigation was conducted. Before taking part in the study, each participant signed a written informed consent form. Data were gathered using a closed-ended professionalism rating questionnaire. The study involved 50 postgraduate students from Riphah International University's Lahore campus, selected through convenient sampling. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data collection was conducted using Professionalism Assessment Forms administered via questionnaires. Subsequently, the collected data underwent analysis using SPSS 21 software. This approach allowed for comprehensive examination and interpretation of the gathered information, contributing to the study's findings and conclusions.

Results: The average age of the participants in the study was 24.06 (SD±.956). Honesty and Integrity 82% of participants (n=41) Reliability and Responsibility 74% of participants (n=37) Respect for Patients 86% of participants (n=43) Respect for Others 72% of participants (n=36) Attendance and Approach to Learning 60% of participants (n=30) Compassion and Empathy 68% of participants (n=34) Communication and Collaboration 68% of participants (n=34) Self Awareness and Knowledge of Limits 56% of participants (n=28) Altruism and Advocacy 76% of participants (n=38) Health 86% of participants (n=43).

Conclusion: It was concluded that an overall levels of professionalism among post graduate students of physical therapists were unsatisfactory.

Keywords: Professionalism, Postgraduate students, Physical therapists, Medical profession.

emphasized by esteemed bodies like the "American College of Physicians" and the "European Federation of Internal Medicine".²

For physical therapists, the notion of professionalism holds particular resonance. Derived from the Latin word "Profession," which implies a public declaration, it speaks to the societal expectation that physical therapists conduct themselves with the utmost professionalism in their practice. The genesis of physical therapy can be traced back to clinical judgments made

while treating patients, leading to the emergence of autonomous practice models in many countries. This evolution has paved the way for direct access services, enabling patients to seek physical therapy without the need for a referral.⁶ However, with autonomy comes increased responsibility. As the profession of physical therapy continues to advance, there's a pressing need for heightened professional accountability to ensure the delivery of high-quality care. This necessitates a steadfast commitment to upholding ethical standards and continuously striving for excellence in patient care. In this ever-evolving landscape, navigating the intersection of proficiency and ethical standards is paramount—an ongoing journey that shapes the future of physical therapy practice.³

In 2003, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) took a significant step forward in shaping the profession by developing core values that became integral to admission-level Physical Therapy programs. These values, encompassing key principles such as accountability, integrity, respect, altruism, commitment, and compassion, laid the foundation for ethical practice within the field.⁴ Subsequently, in 2004, the APTA further solidified its commitment to professionalism by establishing eleven ethical principles, serving as a guiding channel for practitioners to uphold professional conduct and inter-professional care.⁵ Central to these developments is the concept of a 'profession' itself, which carries not only high value and social status but also significant entry obligations and a sense of societal responsibility.⁶ This definition underscores the multifaceted nature of the physical therapy profession, emphasizing not only the technical skills required but also the ethical standards and societal obligations that practitioners must uphold. As such, professionalism in physical therapy extends beyond clinical expertise—it encompasses a holistic approach to patient care that integrates ethical principles, inter-professional collaboration, and a commitment to societal well-being.⁶

Building upon the insights from Franco M's research on Levels of Professionalism among Physical Therapists, which conducted a cross-sectional survey, this study aims to delve deeper into the dynamics of professionalism within the physical therapy community. Franco M's findings highlighted varying levels of professionalism among different groups within the profession, with postgraduate students, researchers, and teaching staff generally exhibiting high levels of professionalism. Notably, the research identified an interesting trend: young male physical therapists were perceived to possess higher levels of professionalism. Furthermore, distinctions were observed among different professional groups, with teaching faculty demonstrating high levels of accountability, social responsibility, caring/compassion, and

altruism, while clinician-therapists and researchers showcased strengths in different aspects of professionalism.⁷

However, despite these nuances, no particular professional group consistently demonstrated significantly higher levels of professionalism across all seven core values. This underscores the complexity of professionalism within the physical therapy profession and highlights the need for further exploration. Accepting the existing levels of professionalism as a baseline not only provides a foundation for promoting development through educational and professional growth approaches but also lays the groundwork for enhancing professionalization by addressing individual and profession-related factors. Against this backdrop, the purpose of the present study, conducted as part of my thesis, is to evaluate the professionalism and core values of physical therapists at RCRS, Lahore. By examining these aspects within a specific context, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on professionalism within the physical therapy profession.⁸

Methodology

Over the span of six months, an insightful cross-sectional survey unfolded its course at Riphah International University's Lahore Campus, focusing on unraveling the dynamics of professionalism among postgraduate students. Employing a meticulous approach, a sample of 50 RCRS students was meticulously selected through convenient sampling method. The data collection phase was meticulously orchestrated, with participants engaged through close-ended questions distributed in the form of handouts. Notably, the Professionalism Assessment Form (PAC form) questionnaire served as the primary instrument for data collection. Upholding ethical principles, informed consent was diligently secured from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

Upon gathering the data, a thorough analysis ensued. Socio-demographic insights were meticulously dissected using descriptive statistics, employing techniques such as mean and standard deviation. SPSS version 21.0 stood as the formidable ally, facilitating the intricate data analysis process, allowing for a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of the findings. To provide a visual narrative of the data trends, an array of graphical representations was employed, ranging from pie charts to bar graphs and histograms, each serving as a canvas to illustrate the intricate patterns within the dataset. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study by Riphah Ethical Committee. (Ref No: (DPT/17/008) The inclusion criteria were meticulously defined, encompassing postgraduate physiotherapist students of all genders hailing from Riphah Lahore. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria were thoughtfully

established to safeguard participant well-being, excluding individuals affected by psychosocial factors or those grappling with recent family loss. By adhering to stringent ethical standards and employing robust data analysis techniques, the study aimed to unravel the subtleties of professionalism among postgraduate physiotherapy students at Riphah Lahore, thereby contributing to the enriching discourse within the field.

Results

The study comprised a total of 50 postgraduate students in terms of demographics. 29 students (58.0%) were female, with 29 students (42.0%) being male as shown in Table I. The sample's average age was 24.06 years, with a standard deviation of just 0.95, which suggests a very uniform distribution of ages among the individuals. These demographic facts shed light on the gender and age distribution as well as other aspects of the study's participants. An overall professionalism

Table I: Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Sub-category	Min	Max	Mean±SD
Age		22.00	26.00	24.06±0.95
		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	42.0%	42.0%	42.0
	Female	58.0%	58.0%	100.0

assessment of satisfactory level was 48% and unsatisfactory level was 52% as shown in Table I.

The statistical results from the professionalism assessment form indicate that the majority of respondents received satisfactory ratings across various dimensions of professionalism. Specifically, in the domain of honesty and integrity, 82.0% of participants were rated as always honest with patients, peers, and staff, with no instances of unsatisfactory ratings. Similarly, in terms of reliability and

conscientiousness, 74.0% of respondents were deemed reliable and punctual, with only 4.0% receiving unsatisfactory ratings. Additionally, aspects such as respect for patients' autonomy and dignity (86.0% satisfactory), adherence to patient safety measures (86.0% satisfactory), and recognition of the need for supervision and professional boundaries (56.0% satisfactory) also showed favorable outcomes. However, there were areas of concern identified, particularly in interpersonal interactions and communication skills, where ratings for effective teamwork and communication were lower, with 32.0% of participants receiving cause for concern ratings as shown in Table II.

Overall, (24 students) 48% students were judged to have exhibited a satisfactory level of professionalism, demonstrating a commitment to morality, communication, and behavior in the field of physiotherapy. In contrast, (26 students) 52% students were given the unacceptable level designation, indicating a need for professional development in areas like as ethical awareness, patient engagement, and general professional demeanor. The results point to the necessity for specialized interventions, educational upgrades, and mentoring programs to raise professionalism levels and guarantee the best possible patient care and ethical behavior within the physiotherapy profession. These statistical findings provide valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement in professionalism among healthcare practitioners, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions to address specific skill gaps and enhance overall professional behavior.

Discussion

In this study, the professionalism of postgraduate physical therapy students enrolled in RCRS's program in Lahore was assessed. A total of 50 participants were selected through a sampling process, and their levels of professionalism were

Table II: Frequency table of Professionalism Assessment Form.

Professionalism Assessment Form	Satisfactory	Cause for Concern	Unsatisfactory	Unable to Observe
Always honest with patients, peers, staff and in professional work (presentations, documentation, communication)	41(82.0%)	9(18.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Reliable and conscientious. Punctual, Completes assigned tasks. Accepts responsibility for errors	37(74.0%)	11(22.2%)	2(4.0%)	0(0.0%)
Consistently demonstrates respect for patients' autonomy and dignity. Maintains confidentiality at all times. Always appropriately dressed for clinical setting.	43(86.0%)	7(14.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Shows respect for patients' relatives, other healthcare team professionals and members of staff	36(72.0%)	12(24.0%)	2(4.0%)	0(0.0%)
Full attendance, participation at seminars and other learning opportunities	30(60.0%)	15(30.0%)	3(6.0%)	2(5.0%)
Listens attentively and responds humanely to patient's and relative's concerns	34(68.0%)	11(22.0%)	5(10.0%)	0(.0%)
Works co-operatively and communicates effectively with patients and healthcare team members	34(68.0%)	16(32.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(%)
Recognizes need for guidance and supervision, aware of appropriate professional boundaries. Personal beliefs do not prejudice approach to patients	28(56.0%)	16(32.0%)	6(12.0%)	0(0.0%)
Adheres to the best interests of patients	38(76.0%)	6(12.0%)	6(12.0%)	0(0.0%)
Does not allow his/her health or condition to put patients and others at risk	43(86.0%)	5(10.0%)	2(4.0%)	0(0.0%)

evaluated using the Professionalism Assessment Form (PAF).

Previous studies have presented diverse definitions of professionalism, with some focusing solely on observable behavior.^{11,12} However, contemporary perspectives view professionalism as a multifaceted construct encompassing beliefs, attitudes, and ethical principles prioritizing patient and societal welfare. Our study aligns with this understanding, employing a comprehensive evaluation scale covering values, attitudes, behaviors, and ethics.⁹

Our findings highlight the importance of promoting positive attitudes towards professionalism and enhancing understanding among healthcare students. While clear behaviors associated with professionalism may be recognized, there may be discrepancies between acknowledged attitudes and observed behaviors. Professionalism is often characterized by qualities such as integrity, altruism, and excellence in practice. The evaluation and facilitation of positive attitudes towards professionalism and understanding were frequently underemphasized, according to past studies. On the other hand, the clear behaviours could be different from what people acknowledge. The authors supported non-academic and co-curricular activities.¹⁴ In the current research, postgraduate students' perceptions of professionalism as a whole were found to be poor.

Previous research has shown a positive progression of professionalism traits among healthcare students, with interns typically displaying higher levels than final-year students.^{10,13}

However, our study identified a concerning trend, as postgraduate students' levels of professionalism were found to be lacking overall. This discrepancy underscores the need for targeted interventions aimed at fostering a culture of professionalism among healthcare professionals. By addressing these gaps, future practitioners can uphold the highest standards of professionalism, ultimately benefiting patients and society as a whole. These findings were previously reported by "Poirier and Gupchup," who discovered an increase in integrity, accountability, and altruism among pharmacy students from their first to fourth years.¹⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that a sizeable percentage of postgraduate physical therapy students lacked the professionalism required of them. To promote superior patient treatment and uphold the profession's integrity, efforts must be made to improve these physiotherapy students' ethical awareness, interaction with others, and behavior.

Limitations: One notable limitation of this study is its reliance on data gathered from a single institution, Riphah International University. This restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of physical therapy students. Additionally, the constraints of time and financial resources may have impacted the scope and depth of the research, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Recommendations: To address the limitations identified, future research endeavors should aim to include participants from multiple institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, expanding the scope of the study to include undergraduate students alongside postgraduates would provide a more comprehensive understanding of professionalism across different stages of education. Given the observed instances of unsatisfactory professionalism among students, further research in this area is warranted to identify underlying factors and develop targeted interventions to promote professional behavior among future healthcare practitioners.

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