

# Exploring Awareness and Professional Perception of Physiotherapy Among Students in a Multidisciplinary Setting

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## Abstract

**Background:** Physiotherapy plays a crucial role in modern healthcare by promoting functional independence, reducing disability, and improving quality of life. Despite its expanding scope and global demand, awareness and perception of physiotherapy as an independent healthcare profession and career option remain limited, particularly among undergraduate students.

**Objective:** This study aimed to assess the level of awareness, knowledge, and perception of physiotherapy as a healthcare profession and career choice among undergraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds.

**Methodology:** A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 273 undergraduate students using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed via online platforms. Convenience sampling was employed. The questionnaire assessed demographic details, awareness, understanding of scope, career perception, sources of information, and knowledge of professional autonomy. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages.

**Results:** The findings revealed that while the majority of participants had basic awareness of physiotherapy, only a moderate proportion demonstrated accurate and comprehensive knowledge. Most respondents associated physiotherapy primarily with exercise therapy, pain relief, and post-injury rehabilitation, with limited awareness of specialized fields such as neurological, cardiopulmonary, and pediatric physiotherapy. A significant proportion did not consider physiotherapy as a first-choice career and perceived it as a supportive or less prestigious profession. Primary sources of information were Social media, friends, and personal experiences, whereas formal educational exposure was limited. Additionally, awareness regarding the professional autonomy of physiotherapy was low, with many respondents believing that physiotherapists work under doctors.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights a gap between general awareness and in-depth understanding of physiotherapy, along with persistent misconceptions regarding its scope and professional status. These findings underscore the need for targeted educational interventions, awareness campaigns, and stronger professional advocacy to enhance recognition and promote physiotherapy as an independent and viable career option.

**Keywords:-** Physiotherapy awareness, Undergraduate students, Career perception, Healthcare profession, Professional autonomy, Knowledge gap, Rehabilitation, Allied health sciences

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## Introduction

Physiotherapy has become increasingly vital in modern healthcare, with the World Health Organization estimating that over 2.4 billion people worldwide could benefit from rehabilitation services at some point in their lives (World Health Organization, 2019). This striking figure highlights the growing global need for effective rehabilitation to address the rising burden of non-communicable diseases, injuries, aging populations, and disability. Within this broader healthcare context, physiotherapy plays a central role in enhancing functional independence, reducing disability, and improving quality of life (Dean et al., 2019). However, despite its expanding scope and demand, awareness of physiotherapy as both a professional career and an independent healthcare discipline remains inadequate, particularly among undergraduate students who are at a critical stage of career decision-making (Morris et al., 2020). In an era where healthcare systems are increasingly shifting toward multidisciplinary and patient-centered approaches, the lack of awareness about physiotherapy presents a significant challenge to workforce development and healthcare accessibility (Jesus et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding and addressing this gap is both timely and essential, making the topic highly significant and worthy of focused academic and practical attention.

This research focuses on assessing the level of awareness, knowledge, and perception of physiotherapy as both a career option and a healthcare profession among undergraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds. Physiotherapy, recognized by the World Physiotherapy as an autonomous and evidence-based profession, encompasses a wide range of specialties including musculoskeletal, neurological, cardiopulmonary, pediatric, and community-based rehabilitation. Existing literature indicates that physiotherapy is well-established as a crucial component of multidisciplinary healthcare, contributing significantly to prevention, treatment, and long-term management of various conditions (World Physiotherapy, 2022; Dean et al., 2019). However, what remains insufficiently explored is the depth of understanding and perception of this profession among undergraduate students, particularly those outside health-related fields. While some studies suggest that general awareness of physiotherapy exists, detailed knowledge regarding its scope, professional autonomy, and career pathways is often limited or fragmented (Morris et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive data

examining how these perceptions influence career choices and the overall representation of physiotherapy in the healthcare workforce. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by systematically evaluating both the known aspects of physiotherapy awareness and the unexplored dimensions related to students' attitudes, misconceptions, and career considerations.

This research is necessary to address critical theoretical, practical, and societal gaps in understanding the awareness of physiotherapy among undergraduate students. From a theoretical perspective, although physiotherapy is recognized by the World Health Organization as an essential component of rehabilitation services, there remains limited integration of allied health career awareness within educational frameworks, leading to insufficient conceptual clarity among students regarding its scope and autonomy. Practically, previous studies have largely focused on healthcare students, leaving a significant gap in data related to non-medical undergraduates, who constitute a large proportion of potential future applicants to the profession (Morris et al., 2020). Additionally, existing research often relies on small sample sizes or region-specific data, limiting generalizability and failing to capture broader trends in awareness and perception. Societally, the lack of awareness contributes to the underutilization of physiotherapy services and a shortage of skilled professionals, particularly in developing healthcare systems where rehabilitation needs are rapidly increasing. Challenges such as misconceptions about physiotherapy being merely exercise-based therapy, limited career counseling, and inadequate public health promotion further exacerbate this issue. Therefore, this study is essential to provide comprehensive insights into these gaps, overcome limitations of prior research, and support the development of targeted educational and policy-level interventions aimed at strengthening the recognition and uptake of physiotherapy as a vital healthcare profession.

## Material and Methodology

### Study Design

Knowledge and awareness about physiotherapy profession were explored using an online cross-sectional survey.

### Respondents

The respondents were required to be eighteen years of age or above. They must have internet access and able to comprehend English.

This study adopted a quantitative, **cross-sectional** research design to assess the awareness of physiotherapy as a career and healthcare profession

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among undergraduate students. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed through Google Forms, allowing efficient distribution and response collection in a digital format.

The study population comprised undergraduate students from various academic disciplines. A total of **273 participants** voluntarily responded to the survey. A convenience sampling method was used, as the questionnaire was circulated through online platforms such as email and social media. Inclusion criteria consisted of students currently enrolled in undergraduate programs, while incomplete responses were excluded from the final analysis.

The questionnaire was designed to capture demographic details (such as age, gender, and field of study) and assess awareness, knowledge, and perceptions regarding physiotherapy. It included multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items focusing on areas such as understanding of physiotherapy scope, roles in healthcare, career opportunities, and sources of information. The content of the questionnaire was developed based on existing literature and relevant guidelines from professional bodies such as World Physiotherapy to ensure content validity.

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of responses was maintained. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the option to withdraw at any stage. Following are the questions used in the survey:

- a) Have you ever heard of Physiotherapy profession?
- b) If a student wants to pursue physiotherapy, which stream should they choose at the intermediate level?
- c) According to you is physiotherapy considered as an Independent profession or no?
- d) What is your source of information regarding physiotherapy profession?
- e) Do you know about the regulatory body of physiotherapy?
- f) Which fields do you think physiotherapy covers?
- g) According to you what defines physiotherapy as the best? Which of the following physiotherapy machines have you heard about?
- h) When physiotherapy is initiated, all medications that the patient takes for the condition should be stopped.

Data collected through Google Forms were exported to spreadsheet format and analyzed using descriptive

statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and graphical representations. The analysis aimed to identify the level of awareness and highlight common perceptions and knowledge gaps among undergraduate students regarding physiotherapy as a profession.

### Results

A total of 273 undergraduate students participated in the study. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to assess awareness and perceptions regarding physiotherapy. Participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, including both healthcare and non-healthcare streams, allowing for a broader comparative perspective.

#### General Awareness of Physiotherapy

Have you ever heard of Physiotherapy profession?  
278 responses

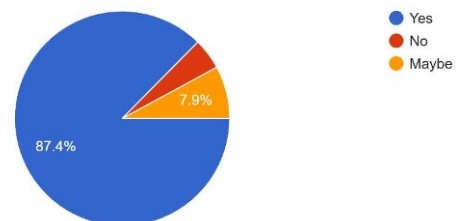


Figure 1:-Awareness of physiotherapy Yes — 87.4%  
No — 4.7% Maybe — 7.9%

Figure 1 shows that 87.4% respondents aware about physiotherapy, whereas 7.9% were uncertain and 4.7% indicated no prior awareness. Furthermore, when queried regarding the appropriate academic stream at the higher secondary level for pursuing physiotherapy, 90.3% correctly identified the medical stream, demonstrating a strong level of foundational knowledge.

#### Source of information

What is your source of information regarding physiotherapy profession?  
278 responses

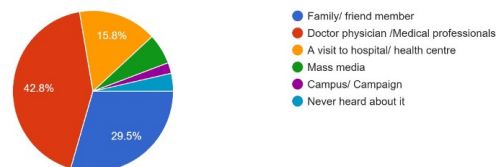


Figure 2:- Source of Information

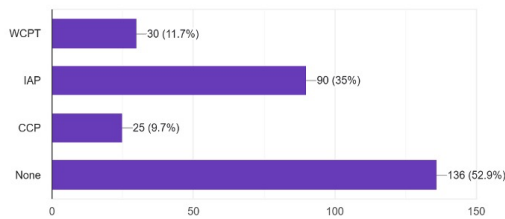
Figure 2 shows that primary source of knowledge about physiotherapy was doctors and medical professionals (42.8%), followed by family or friends (29.5%), hospital or health centre visits (15.8%), and mass media (6.1%). Only 2.2% cited campus or awareness campaigns, while 3.6% had never encountered information about the profession — highlighting underutilization of community-level

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outreach.

## Professional identity and regulatory awareness

Do you know about the regulatory body of physiotherapy?  
257 responses



**Figure 3:- Professional identity and regulatory awareness.**

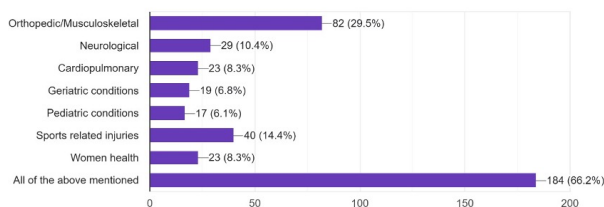
Figure 3 shows that 78.8% perceived physiotherapy as an independent profession, while 13.7% remained uncertain. However, regulatory awareness was notably poor: 52.9% of respondents were unaware of any regulatory body, and among those who identified one, the Indian Association of Physiotherapists (IAP) was the most recognized (35%), followed by WCPT (11.7%) and CCP (9.7%).

## Understanding of the Scope of Physiotherapy

Analysis of responses revealed that students predominantly associated physiotherapy with:

- Exercise-based treatment
- Pain management
- Post-injury rehabilitation

Which fields do you think physiotherapy covers?  
278 responses



**Figure 4:-Different disciplines of Physiotherapy**

In contrast, awareness was considerably lower for specialized areas such as:

Neurological rehabilitation, Cardiopulmonary physiotherapy, Pediatric and community-based physiotherapy.

This trend highlights a significant lack of awareness regarding the full scope and diversity of physiotherapy practice.

## Perception of Physiotherapy as a Career

The results show that physiotherapy is not widely considered a primary career choice among students. A substantial proportion of respondents perceived it as:

- A supportive or auxiliary profession
- Less prestigious compared to fields like medicine or nursing

This indicates the presence of professional hierarchy bias, which may negatively influence career preference.

## Participant Suggestions

Qualitative responses from open-ended questions revealed several recurring themes:

- The need for awareness campaigns and camps
- Establishment and strengthening of regulatory bodies
- Strict action against unqualified practitioners (quackery)
- Increased promotion through media and educational institutions

These suggestions emphasize the demand for systematic efforts to improve awareness and professional recognition.

## Discussion

The present study assessed the level of awareness and perception of physiotherapy among undergraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds. The findings reveal a pattern of high general awareness but limited in-depth understanding, along with misconceptions about professional roles and career status. These results are consistent with, and in some areas extend, existing literature.

Although the majority of participants had heard of physiotherapy, only a moderate proportion demonstrated accurate knowledge of the profession. This aligns with previous studies that report superficial awareness among students and the general population, where physiotherapy is recognized but not well understood (Sharma & Gupta, 2018; Kumar et al., 2020).

The observed gap between awareness and knowledge suggests that exposure does not necessarily translate into understanding, which has also been emphasized in earlier research (Patel &

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Shah, 2017). This indicates the need for more structured educational interventions.

Participants in this study predominantly associated physiotherapy with exercise therapy, pain relief, and musculoskeletal rehabilitation, while awareness of specialized domains such as neurological, cardiopulmonary, and pediatric physiotherapy was limited.

This finding is consistent with prior research, which indicates that physiotherapy is often narrowly perceived as musculoskeletal care, neglecting its broader clinical applications (Iqbal et al., 2019; Alghadir et al., 2017). Such limited understanding reflects a persistent knowledge gap and highlights the need to emphasize the multidisciplinary scope of physiotherapy in awareness programs.

A significant proportion of respondents did not consider physiotherapy as a first-choice career and perceived it as a secondary or less prestigious profession compared to medicine or nursing.

This perception has been widely documented in previous studies, where physiotherapy is often viewed as an auxiliary healthcare profession rather than an independent discipline (Turner & Whitfield, 2015; Ramanathan et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the idea that professional hierarchy and societal perceptions continue to influence career preferences among students.

However, some recent studies have reported a gradual improvement in the perception of physiotherapy as a career, particularly in regions with strong professional advocacy (WCPT, 2019). The contrast suggests that regional differences in awareness and professional promotion may play a significant role.

The study found that social media, friends, family, and personal experiences were the primary sources of information, while formal educational channels played a minimal role.

This trend supports earlier findings that informal sources dominate health profession awareness, often leading to incomplete or inaccurate knowledge (Singh et al., 2018). The limited role of academic and career counseling systems indicates a missed opportunity for structured career guidance, which has been highlighted as a key factor in shaping informed career decisions (Lent et al., 2002).

A notable finding was the low awareness of physiotherapy as an autonomous profession, with many participants believing that physiotherapists work under doctors.

This misconception has been consistently reported in the literature (Higgs et al., 2017; Ojha et al., 2016), suggesting that professional identity and autonomy

are not well communicated to the public. The persistence of this belief indicates that efforts to establish physiotherapy as an independent healthcare profession have not fully translated into public awareness.

Overall, the findings of this study largely support existing research, particularly in terms of:

- Limited depth of knowledge despite general awareness
- Narrow understanding of scope
- Misconceptions about autonomy
- Lower perceived professional status

However, the study also highlights a continuing reliance on informal information sources, which may be more pronounced in the current digital era due to increased social media influence. This adds to the existing literature by emphasizing the changing dynamics of information dissemination.

### Conclusion

In summary, the study confirms that while physiotherapy is widely recognized, significant gaps remain in understanding its scope, autonomy, and professional value. These findings are largely consistent with previous research and underscore the need for systematic, multi-level interventions to improve awareness and perception among students.

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