Patient Choices for Musculoskeletal Injury

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Abstract
Musculoskeletal injuries are a common cause of chronic pain and disability. Accredited massage therapists have the necessary skills to treat a wide range of minor musculoskeletal injuries. The aim of this study was to examine patient treatment choices for musculoskeletal injury of one hundred and five adults using interview. It was found that treatment of minor musculoskeletal injuries was predominantly carried out by physiotherapists or medical doctors. The potential contribution of massage therapy to the treatment of minor musculoskeletal injury is not being realised. Further education of medical doctors may be required to increase the number of patient referrals to massage therapy.

Reference

Keywords: Complementary medicine; massage therapy; musculoskeletal injury; complementary medicine education.

Introduction
Musculoskeletal injuries are a common cause of chronic pain and disability.

In 2001, 495,300 Australians reported a long term musculoskeletal condition caused by a motor vehicle accident, 545,200 by a sporting or exercise related injury and a further 819,000 reported a long term injury from a work related accident. Back injuries were prevalent with disc and joint injuries also common.

The use of complementary medicine is increasing in Australia, particularly for chronic pain conditions. Estimates place the number of qualified massage therapists in Australia at between 10,000 and 15,000. Their education has become increasingly rigorous especially since the introduction of the Health Training Package in 2000 which set a minimum professional massage therapy qualification at Diploma level.

A national survey of 2,192 remedial therapists in 2002 found that 94% had achieved the minimum professional qualification. It would appear then that massage therapists are well equipped to treat a range of first or second grade musculoskeletal injuries.

Aim
The aim of the study was to examine the treatment choices for musculoskeletal injuries of adults in Sydney and the Central Coast, NSW.

Method
This study was part of the assessment requirements for Research Methods for Stage 4 Diploma of Remedial Massage students at Meadowbank TAFE.

A questionnaire was designed to gather information on types of musculoskeletal injuries and past and future treatment choices. A pilot study of 21 questionnaires was conducted and recommendations were adopted in the final version where appropriate. The final questionnaire consisted of 12 open and closed questions.

The Research Methods class consisted of 21 students who each conducted five interviews using standardised introductory remarks and questioning. Respondents were adults over 18 years living in Sydney or the Central Coast.

Data was collated using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and analysed using SPSS v11.0 for Students.

Results
Respondents lived in 47 different suburbs of Sydney or the Central Coast. The study found that 95 out of 105 respondents had previously suffered a musculoskeletal injury, with 46 reporting injury in the last year. The most common injury was to the lumbar spine (22.9%), followed by neck (21%) and knee (16.2%) (see figure 1).

Of the people interviewed, 64% had received some form of treatment for their musculoskeletal injury. Physiotherapy (25.7%) and medical treatment (17.1%) were the most commonly reported treatments, while 7.6% reported receiving massage therapy treatment. Figure 2 shows the types of previous treatment reported by respondents.

Most respondents sought the particular type of treatment as a result of referral (30.5%), word of mouth (17.1%) or their previous experience with a therapist or therapy (16.2%) (see figure 3).
When asked what their treatment choice would be if they were to suffer a musculoskeletal injury in the future, respondents favoured physiotherapy (36.2%) and medical treatment (25.7%). Although 75% of respondents said they had considered massage therapy as a treatment, most (72.1%) thought the main benefit of massage therapy was relaxation (see figure 4). Only 1% of respondents thought that massage therapy could contribute to injury rehabilitation.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Students of the Research Methods class were asked to interview five adults who were unknown to them.

Although respondents were drawn from different age groups and 47 different suburbs of Sydney and the Central Coast, the representativeness of this sample should be interpreted with caution.

The study found that 95 out of 105 respondents had suffered a previous musculoskeletal injury and 42.2% had been treated by a physiotherapist or medical doctor.

Massage therapy was not known by 99% of respondents for its therapeutic benefits in the treatment of minor musculoskeletal injuries. Referral from medical doctors and other health professionals, as the most common reason given for choosing treatment for musculoskeletal injuries, was an important influence on the treatment choices made by patients.

Further education of the referrers about the evidence-based therapeutic benefits of massage therapy is warranted.

**References**
