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Category 1: Research Report

THE PREVALENCE OF EATING DISORDERS RISK IN STUDENTS COMPLETING THE FINAL TWO YEARS OF ENTRY-LEVEL PHYSICAL THERAPY CURRICULA: A PILOT STUDY OF MISSOURI PROGRAMS

Wilder, E

Program in Physical Therapy, Saint Louis University, Saint Louis, MO

Purpose/Hypothesis: The purpose of this research was to determine the prevalence of eating disorders risk in students in the last two years (professional phase) of physical therapy curricula in Missouri Schools and to examine the association between eating disorder risk and age, body mass index (BMI) and race.

Number of Subject: Participants included 367 physical therapist students.

Materials/Methods: Three hundred and sixty-seven physical therapist students in the last two years of training in six of seven physical therapy programs in the state of Missouri were invited to participate in the study. Study materials were returned anonymously and data were collapsed across programs. Self-reported demographic data of age, race, gender, height and weight were collected. To determine eating disorders risk, respondents completed the EAT-26, a reliable, valid, and widely used standardized screening tool. Respondents who scored ≥ 20 on the EAT-26 were classified as at-risk for an eating disorder. Body mass index was calculated from self-reported height and weight and categorized (underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese) using Center for Disease Control guidelines.

Results: Usable data were available from 350 (97.36%) respondents. Respondents' mean age was 24.3 years (SD: 3.29). 90% reported their race as white (90%). The majority of the respondents were female (73.14%). 11.4% (39/350) of respondents were categorized as at-risk for an eating disorder (14.8% female vs 1.06% males). There was no association between age and eating disorder risk (Mann Whitney U test, $p = 0.289$), between BMI category and eating disorder risk (Chi Square = 1.715, $p = 0.634$), and race (white versus all other) and eating disorders risk (Chi Square = 1.157, $p = 0.282$). A significant association between gender and risk of eating disorders was identified (Chi Square = 13.186, $p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: This is the first study to examine eating disorders risk in physical therapy students. 11.4% of the students were at-risk for an eating disorder based on their EAT-26 scores. While an eating disorder risk does not predict actual development of an eating disorder, physical therapy educators should be aware of this potential risk in students in the final stages of education and clinical preparation, a time of decidedly greater stress, vulnerability, responsibility, and financial need, all which may contribute to increased risk for eating disorders their students.