

Key elements of effective supervision for physiotherapists

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Background: The physiotherapy profession is challenged to develop effective clinical supervision (CS) programs that meet the needs of physiotherapists and health services. The current study aimed to identify physiotherapists' preferred structure and content of a public health service CS program as a first step towards the development of an effective and sustainable supervision program. The research question developed was: What are the key elements considered essential for effective clinical supervision in physiotherapy?

Methods: Qualitative focus groups collected data using an emergent-systematic focus group design. Data were analysed using principles of thematic analysis and constant comparison methods. Forty six physiotherapists and six physiotherapy assistants from a large regional health service attended one of seven focus groups. Physiotherapists' and assistants' preferences regarding supervision were collected.

Results: Professional supervision was the term preferred by participants to describe a supervision program encompassing both clinical and non-clinical activities. Supervision must be individualised and responsive to the supervisee's needs. Participants highly valued informal supervision addressing needs as they arise, rather than regular scheduled sessions. Supervision formats identified as highly effective, incorporated contextual learning elements. Participants recognised the value of formal systems and structures to ensure supervision is accessible, resourced and sustainable.

Discussion: Physiotherapists' and assistants' ideas and preferences for a supervision program were identified that supports others' suggestions that much workplace learning occurs informally and contextually. Based on these findings we propose that supervision models emphasising scheduled reflective discussion alone may not provide effective supervision for physiotherapists. Professional supervision programs should acknowledge informal supervision in meeting supervision needs for physiotherapists however formal systems and structures are required to ensure professional supervision programs are effective and sustainable. We suggest that supervision programs based on staff needs and preferences are more likely to be effective at supporting staff and improving care quality.