

Acceptance of Primary Contact Physiotherapy by ED staff – results of a qualitative study

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Background: Primary Contact Practitioner Physiotherapists (PP) are increasingly common in Australian Emergency Departments and provide targeted care to people with uncomplicated musculoskeletal conditions such as sprains, strains, and simple fractures. Despite this, ED staff attitudes and perspectives regarding the introduction of PPs services are largely unknown. The current study aimed to gather information on the effects of introducing a PP service on existing staff and services in a large regional ED.

Methods: Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling to ensure data were captured from as many different ED professional groups as possible. Data collection occurred in two waves, approximately one year apart during the first 18 months of PP service operation to capture both initial and subsequent impressions of the service. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and focus groups that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, congruent with hermeneutics, was used to analyse data.

Results: Forty-two staff from eight professional groups agreed to participate. Acceptance emerged as a key theme. Acceptance of the PP service by ED staff was not automatic, unconditional or implied, and represented a continuum from PPs being tolerated as transient visitors, to being subsumed as integrated members of the ED team. Acceptance of the PP service and its members was contingent upon the PPs demonstrating three interdependent qualities: being trustworthy; valuing learning; and complementing (not competing with) ED practises to achieve ED goals.

Discussion: ED staff were not passive recipients of the PP service, nor did they accept it at the direction of health administrators. Staff made their own judgements regarding the merit of the service. Voluntary acceptance of the PP service by ED staff was crucial to the success and integration of the service. Understanding and manipulating factors that influence acceptance can increase the likelihood of successfully implementing PP services.