

# Volunteerism from a Physiotherapy Standpoint: Associated Challenges and Potential Ideas towards Resolution

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**Abstract:-** Volunteerism has long sought to right social inequalities. Volunteers over the years have attempted to end violence against women and children, improve sanitation of drinking water, rebuild communities, provide healthcare and education, feed and clothe the hungry, and fight social and economic injustice. However, there continue to be billions of people in the world living well below the poverty line and numerous dying daily due to lack of resources. This article addresses obstacles within the framework of volunteering from the perspective of a physiotherapy student. In addition are suggestions of effective ways to increase the impact of volunteerism across the globe.

## I. INTRODUCTION

POVERTY is an ongoing issue affecting billions of people around the world. An estimated 3 billion people are living off less than \$2.50 per day<sup>1</sup>. Of those 3 billion, 767 million are living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day<sup>2</sup> and countless individuals are faced with homelessness, hunger, and poor health. According to data collected by the United Nations, estimated 42,000 people had to leave their homes daily in 2014 due to conflict<sup>2</sup>. 805 million people in the world do not have enough to eat, and 750 million lack clean drinking water<sup>1</sup>. Even more disturbing is the fact that 842,000 people are dying each year due to poor sanitation from unclean water<sup>3</sup>, which is roughly 2,300 people per day<sup>1</sup>. In 2013, the World Health Organization estimated that close to 400 million people worldwide did not have access to at least one of the following essential health services- family planning, skilled birth attendance, prenatal care, child immunization, tuberculosis treatment, antiretroviral therapy, and access to clean water<sup>3</sup>(Table 1)<sup>4</sup>.

## II. MOTIVATION FOR VOLUNTEERING

It is safe to say that most health professionals become involved in their chosen fields because they feel a civic and ethical duty to help others. With an estimated 7 billion people in the world, the need for healthcare workers is never scarce<sup>5</sup>. It is difficult to overlook the shortage of quality healthcare around the world. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are so many opportunities for volunteer work within the healthcare fields, and that the involvement of health professionals and graduate students alike in volunteerism is expanding. For many, the call to volunteer is driven by images and reports of social and economic inequality. The experience can be eye-opening and life

altering. It can give a voice and platform to those unheard and forgotten, providing hope and inspiration. However, with such great need around the world it can seem as though one has barely left an impact, and many volunteers are left with the nagging feeling of needing to do more.

## III. REALITY Vs EXPECTATION

Commonly volunteers tend to volunteer in order to give back to society. They wish to re-shape communities and on an even greater scale, change the world one volunteering act at a time. World problems can be discussed, read about, or viewed on television networks and throughout social media. However, there is no substitute for real-life experience.

The expectation during volunteering is to catalyze change to witness the positive impact made on the lives of others. However, in most volunteer situations, especially healthcare, the change is gradual. Unless several months to years are spent on a single project, it is unlikely to see the effect or outcome of the time put in volunteering. Taking that much time out to volunteer is not a realistic option for most individuals. The following study addresses problems witnessed while volunteering at an assisted living facility in Costa Rica from the viewpoint of a physiotherapist.

Some volunteer projects provide essentials like food, water, and clothing. However, health care is a bit more complicated. In order to improve certain health conditions one needs medication, sanitary instruments, and appropriate equipment without which it is challenging to effectively provide the most basic healthcare.

## IV. BARRIERS TO HEALTHCARE IN VOLUNTEER SETTINGS

### A. Lack of Staff

There is an estimated 4.45 skilled health care professionals per 1000 patients<sup>6, 7</sup>. On a volunteer study trip in Costa Rica, it was observed that the assisted living facility had an estimated 50 patients to one physiotherapist and medical doctor ratio. There were two nurses, and roughly four certified nursing assistants (CNAs). The physiotherapist worked three days per week and the nurses worked alternate days. Out of those 50 patients, about 20 were stroke patients with limited mobility that required assistance. The physiotherapist managed the patients by conducting group exercises. However, stroke patients with severe disability and limited mobility with requirement of

individual care were often left unattended, or received bare minimum care.

#### *B. Decreased Motivation in Staff*

Individuals feel demotivated and low on energy when they lack job satisfaction. In healthcare, this greatly affects the quality of treatment that patients receive. The setting in Costa Rica were seriously understaffed. An individual healthcare professional was responsible for 50 patients with barely any chance for rest breaks leading them to potential burn out. In addition, there was the issue of scarcity of equipment and supplies. Attempting to treat wounds or severe contractures without appropriate modalities, medications, and/or dressings can be very discouraging. Some of the examples which showcase the challenge working in such a situation are as follows: A patient weighed roughly 80 pounds, was on a nasogastric tube for feedings, and had severe flexion contractures in his arms, legs, and hands. Even though the nurses repositioned him, he kept developing new pressure ulcers. Medication and dressings were limited. The duty doctor attempted to debride a pressure injury on the patient's greater trochanter, but the wound continually got worse and eventually reached the bone. Due to lack of movement, fluid built into the patient's lungs and his breathing became labored. He had edema in his feet and the facility did not have enough pillows or blankets to elevate his limbs enough to make a difference. Another example would be a patient who was one month post-stroke and non-ambulatory due to severe contractures in his arms and legs. The understaffed facility that couldn't carry out early detection and intervention contributed to his condition getting to such a worsened status before it was eventually noticed. Wound healing is influenced by proper medical care in the form of appropriate medications and dressings along with sufficient nutrition. In addition, there are several secondary complications that are preventable with appropriate therapy. If a staff member runs low on motivation, it may limit the options that they see as possibilities for treatment.

#### *C. Bending the Rules Leading to Poor Quality of Care*

Collegiality and team work is needed to maintain an optimal work environment. However, favoritism is a trait that affects the work environment in a negative way. Personal interests mixed in the professional environment is not always desirable as it often clouds judgment and rules are treated as an option. In the case of senior officials practicing partial behavior or showcasing overt or covert bias, there is the possibility of disputes not being appropriately addressed causing dissatisfaction among colleagues. This would further reduce the motivation level of the staff and eventually promote a toxic work environment.

#### *D. Language Barrier*

In a volunteer situation abroad, communication can be an issue with patients and staff. Providing allied health care is complicated with language being an important component that helps communicate patient needs from all medical standpoints. When patients are well informed and aware of the situation, it helps alleviate anxiety. In cases when patients wish to communicate their needs, pertinent information is lost in translation or lost altogether due to the language barrier.

#### *E. Lack of Awareness Regarding Physiotherapy*

Awareness about physiotherapy is present in some countries while in other countries, the concept is fairly new and is still growing. Many developing countries provide physiotherapy services but there is lack of awareness. Lack of awareness can influence healthcare in the following ways:

##### ➤ *Patient Attitude*

Lack of awareness of the benefits of physiotherapy, might result in patient compliance issues. In many countries medication can be purchased from pharmacies without a prescription from a doctor. There are also countries that believe in alternative forms of medicine that have been practiced for hundreds of years. The patient might go for these alternatives instead of physiotherapy due to being unaware of the benefits that they are potentially missing. It can be difficult to achieve effective outcomes without a patient's trust and belief.

##### ➤ *Education Opportunities*

Many countries do not have doctorate programs or even masters programs in physiotherapy. This factor may alter the perception of individual quality of professional expertise. Alternatively, there may not be enough funding to create programs or aid students in paying for school. This can impact accessibility to education in the field. If there is lack of physiotherapy programs or students graduating from programs, there is unlikely to be knowledge of the field and the services it can potentially provide. In contrast, too many programs and large class sizes can be detrimental and may affect the potential job opportunities and result in lack of job security.

##### ➤ *Job Security*

Hitting the right balance between demand and supply is essential to ensure the growth and sustenance of any profession. Few physiotherapy programs, fewer therapists and lack of awareness all lead to reduced demand for physiotherapists. Conversely, too many programs, too many therapists and not enough job openings would lead to frustration along with dilution of quality. This can impact wages as well as quality of healthcare. With several people in line for the same position, facilities may pay less due to having an upper hand. Less pay can reduce job satisfaction and motivation, therefore leading to complacency and poor performance. Poor performance affects the way patients view the physiotherapy profession as a whole.

#### *F. Limitation on the Extent of Involvement of Foreign Visitors*

Just as scope of practice varies by state in the U.S., each country differs in what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for its physiotherapists. In such cases, a physiotherapist volunteering in a foreign country might be in for a shock. The variability in the extent of involvement allowed for the physiotherapists in the foreign areas of volunteering might again vary from site to site. Some sites accept as much help as they can receive, while others tend to play safe and limit the freedom of the volunteers. In Costa Rica, many of the hospitals let healthcare volunteers do nothing more than collect patient vitals. In the assisted living facility visited by the author, physiotherapists, nurses, and CNAs shared certain responsibilities due to staff shortage, and volunteers were able to treat patients

accordingly. Sharing duties and helping one another reduced the staff workload and ensured patients were receiving care consistently. In situations where volunteers are limited in how they can treat patients, workforce is left drained of motivation leaving staff dissatisfied, and opportunities for improvements in patient health care are wasted.

## V. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR BARRIERS

### A. Funding to Help Increase Opportunities for the Deserving

#### ➤ Grants

Grants are available to fund non-profit organizations, businesses, and students. Grant money can assist volunteer organizations and facilities by aiding the provision of adequate resources and staff. Grant money can also help funding for education within the healthcare fields.

#### ➤ Donations

Many volunteer organizations rely heavily on external donations to provide assistance. However, due to platforms like GoFundMe\*, those interested in volunteering can get help paying for their travel expenses as well.

#### ➤ Scholarships

Scholarships are another resource that can provide financial assistance to deserving students in need. A less commonly known fact is that many volunteer organizations also provide scholarships to assist the volunteers.

### B. Increase Awareness

#### ➤ Outreach Programs

Reaching out to volunteer organizations can help develop awareness in the community regarding the availability of various professional help and the resources in the community for fulfilling the healthcare needs of the people. These outreach programs have the potential to grab the attention of relevant charities and agencies to help mobilize funds to improve healthcare facilities and awareness in the community. Reaching out to volunteer organizations can also positively impact the amount of supplies and quality of resources provided to a facility. Outreach programs can be set-up in schools, colleges, places of worship frequented by people and other venues that are easily accessible and open to the public. These programs work on increasing awareness about community needs, which in turn will help gain resources and recruit volunteers and staff. In addition to providing information, these outreach programs can also provide free services to individuals who are unable to travel to hospitals and clinics (e.g. by providing a mobile physiotherapy clinic, a mobile operation theatre, etc.).

#### ➤ Traveling Camps

Many places of worship, schools, colleges, and clubs conduct mission trips with several volunteers participating in them. Such organizations are a great recruitment resource, as they provide individuals a sneak peek into their dream profession along with the relevant resources. In addition, traveling camps provide options for fundraising to increase volunteering opportunities.

### C. Provision of Cost Effective Equipment and Assistive Devices

An ability to be flexible and creative while designing cost effective equipment helps handle financial constraints in healthcare. Such creativity with equipment also comes handy while operating the mobile clinics in rural areas lacking resources. In several camps that are held in rural areas or in situations where provisions of professional level equipment might not be feasible, this creative thinking provides flexibility. Assistive devices and equipment can also be fashioned by using things that are readily available. For instance, splints can be designed from using rolled newspapers, tree trunks can be cut and made into parallel bars, etc. PVC pipes are also very cost effective and can be designed into parallel bars, walker frames, hurdles and more. Pool noodles are a great tool to cushion devices. Balance beams can be made with inexpensive materials like rail road ties or scrap wood. Wrist and ankle weights can be made with scrap fabric, needle, thread, and using some filling like beans, rice, pebbles, or soil to add weight to it. Thanks to various applications like Pinterest\*, one can always find fun ways to get creative. However, if creativity is not a strong suit, inexpensive exercise equipment can be purchased. Stability balls and Therabands are relatively inexpensive and can be used in flexible ways to incorporate a variety of activities. Several assistive devices and exercise equipment donated by people to thrift stores can be picked up for a relatively low cost. Kinesiotape is another beneficial investment with multiple therapeutic uses.

### D. Techniques to Improve Motivation

#### ➤ Rewards/Recognition

Giving out certificates and plaques in honor of employee milestones and achievements ensures individuals feel recognized and appreciated. Recognizing birthdays and celebrating employee appreciation days are other ways to show staff that they are appreciated and boost staff morale.

#### ➤ Team Building Activities

Creating friendly competitions among staff is a fun way to encourage team building. It is also important to create ways outside of the work environment to encourage socialization among employees, such as hosting holiday parties or team participation in a marathon.

### E. Set Rules for Professional Behavior

Conflicts of interest can be avoided to some extent by enforcing a no fraternization policy. Another suggestion is to create objective ways to track staff productivity to address performance evaluations objectively. It is also key to maintaining job satisfaction within staff, while promoting motivation and quality of performance. Employees should feel that there is an open door policy to address concerns without the fear of retaliation. To ensure this, a comment box or a suggestion box can be made available for the employees to leave concerns that need to be addressed.

### F. Methods to Overcome the Language Barrier

#### ➤ Phones and Electronics

Thanks to cell phones, one can download applications such as DuoLingo\* and Google Translate\* to aid translation. Electronic dictionaries can also be used if the financial resources are available. Many of these applications have computerized voices that prevent errors in pronunciation.

#### ➤ Language Dictionaries

In order to prevent relying on battery life and cell phone service, dictionaries can be used to translate words as well. It can be cumbersome thumbing through pages; a helpful suggestion is to bookmark the pages with commonly used words.

#### ➤ Handwritten/Typed Notes

Carrying a list of pertinent medical terminology and everyday words is very effective in communicating with patients and staff.

Service	Target Population	People in Need (millions)	Associated Health Outcomes
Family Planning	Females 15-19 years of age	217	21.6 million unsafe abortions
Four Prenatal Care Visits	Pregnant Women	50	2.8 million neonatal deaths; 289 thousand maternal deaths
Skilled Birth Attendance	Delivering Women	38	2.8 million neonatal deaths; 289 thousand maternal deaths
3 doses of DTP Containing Vaccine	Infants	22	6.3 million child deaths
Antiretroviral Therapy	People living with HIV	22	1.5 million AIDS-related deaths
Treatment of TB	People with TB	4	1.1 million TB deaths
Sleeping under an insecticide treated bed net	People living in high-risk malaria settings	471	584 thousand deaths due to malaria

Table 1: Number of People without Essential health services in priority areas in 2013

Source: [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/174536/1/9789241564977\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/174536/1/9789241564977_eng.pdf?ua=1)

## VI. CONCLUSION

Volunteering is an extremely rewarding experience that provides valuable internal and external perspective. Through volunteerism, communities have been rebuilt and become self-sustainable, individuals have been given quality education, and impoverished have been supplied with food, clean water, medicine and other basic needs. However, there is still work to be done. Lives are lost daily due to lack of resources within healthcare facilities. Volunteering alone does not make up for lack of sufficient supplies in many struggling communities, but it is a start towards making a difference. With determination and some creativity, facilities and volunteers can make a lasting impact provided they keep up with their motivation and work consistently towards a better world.

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