



**World
Physiotherapy**



**Impact of the
COVID-19
pandemic on
physiotherapy
services globally**



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Background

On 11 March 2020 WHO officially declared a global pandemic due to COVID-19. This pandemic has greatly impacted the physiotherapy profession globally. This report will highlight some of the issues faced by the physiotherapy profession, focusing on the first wave of the pandemic.

In 2020, World Physiotherapy member organisations were sent an online survey, which included questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted physiotherapy practice and the governance of World Physiotherapy's member organisations.¹

The survey included 13 questions related to COVID-19:

- impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in World Physiotherapy member organisations' operations (for example, budgeting, governance or service provision)
- impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on physiotherapy practice at a national level
- actions undertaken by World Physiotherapy member organisations to support their membership (for example, advocacy, training, access to personal protective equipment (PPE))

Some of those questions were multiple choice and some were open field for respondents to complete.

The high response rate, 90%, demonstrates strong engagement between World Physiotherapy and its member organisations, even in a challenging year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The census date for this data collection was 30 June 2020.



Rehabilitation centers, primary care rehabilitation, community rehabilitation shut down. One of our surveys (which we did together with a number of patient organisations) showed that 7 out of 10 patient with chronic diseases experienced decreased access to rehabilitation and 50% reported worsened health.

Member organisation from Europe region



World Physiotherapy regions

World Physiotherapy has five regions, each composed of member organisations in that geographical area.



Africa

21,317 physiotherapists



Asia Western Pacific

383,795 physiotherapists



Europe

807,460 physiotherapists



North America Caribbean

256,490 physiotherapists



South America

432,523 physiotherapists



During the first three months of the pandemic in our country, outpatient and private care services were suspended, many physiotherapists lost their jobs. Later, when care was allowed, the number of patients decreased due to protocols and fear. Although digital physiotherapy was implemented, it is still not a usual practice in our country, there are several rural places where there is no internet and physiotherapists do not know how much to charge per session.

Member organisation from South America region

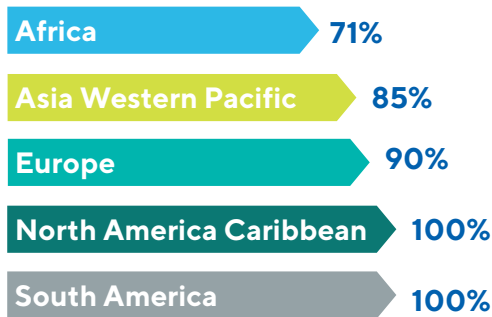


More information about World Physiotherapy regions can be found here

Disruption to physiotherapy services

Of the respondents, 87% of World Physiotherapy member organisations reported physiotherapy practice had been disrupted during the pandemic in their country/territory.

% of countries/territories with disruption to physiotherapy services



Most member organisations reported a disruption of two or three months in their country/territory, mainly between March and May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic.

70% of respondents reported all physiotherapy services had been disrupted during the pandemic.

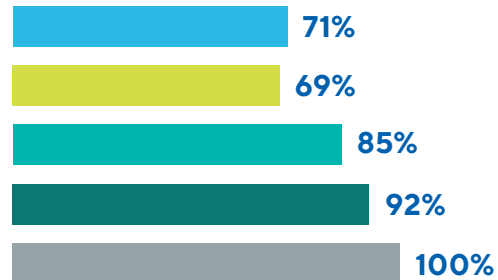
Private practice was the most impacted (**87%**), followed by **public health services** (**81%**), **nursing homes** (**77%**), and **community services** (**72%**).

The **Africa region** had the **lowest levels of disruption across** almost all physiotherapy services. More detailed research needs to be done to identify whether this is due to a lack of disruption to services or to a more general lack of physiotherapists providing services in the region.

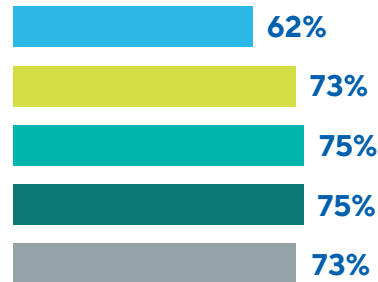
The lack of physiotherapy workforce in the Africa region is a concern that has been identified in other publications. The Africa region only represents 1% of physiotherapists globally.

Disruption by practice category in World Physiotherapy regions

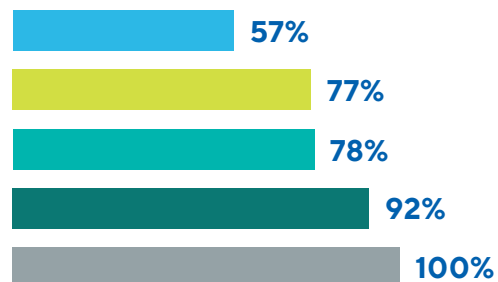
Private



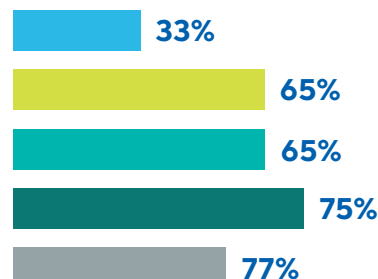
Public



Community



Nursing Homes



When asked to describe how the services had been affected, respondents raised the following issues:

- **Private practice** has been particularly affected due to lockdown restrictions, and patients' fears of infection if they attend for physiotherapy treatment. As a result of this, many physiotherapists have been made unemployed.
- **During lockdown restrictions, only essential physiotherapy treatments** were allowed in many countries/territories. This definition of essential was not consistent within and between countries/territories.
- **Lack of physiotherapists in public services** has resulted in many people affected by COVID-19 not receiving physiotherapy interventions.
- **People with non-Covid long-term conditions** have been particularly affected by the disruption to physiotherapy services because they are more likely to develop complications secondary to their existing condition.
- **In many public health systems**, physiotherapists were redeployed into other healthcare roles to support emergency plans to admit inpatients with COVID-19.
- **There was a lack of knowledge**, not only from people affected by COVID-19 but also from different stakeholders involved in the healthcare process, about the **importance of physiotherapy treatment** and the role of physiotherapists as frontline workers in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Lack of knowledge about safe operating procedures and occupational health and safety** for physiotherapy practices during the COVID-19 pandemic was a concern when returning to practice after a period of lockdown restrictions.
- Disruption to physiotherapy services has fostered, in some countries/territories, the development of legislation and regulations for the use of **telehealth in physiotherapy** services. However, this has resulted in challenges for people in low and middle-income countries/territories due to the lack of access to digital tools.



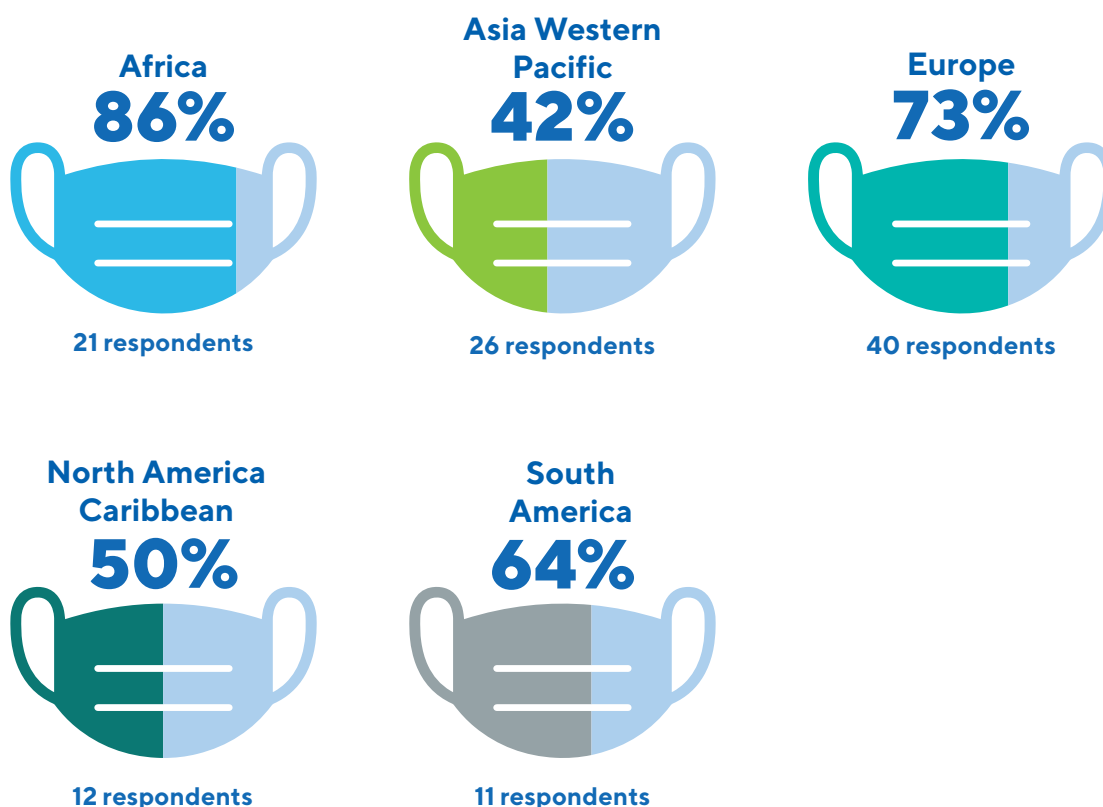
Recent qualitative research² about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on physiotherapists working as part of the frontline response shows physiotherapists' mental health has also been impacted, and comprehensive support is needed for all frontline health professionals.



Access to personal protective equipment (PPE)

65% of respondents said physiotherapists in their country/territory reported challenges in accessing PPE during the pandemic.

% of countries/territories reporting challenges for physiotherapists accessing PPE



Physiotherapist Outpatients stopped attending their PT visits due to fear of infection. The physiotherapist lacked PPE capacity to maintain their practice. Home based physiotherapy services were severely limited due to patient request for discontinuation. Telehealth was attempted but physiotherapy and patients lacks platforms for delivery.

Member organisation from Africa region



Advocacy

Respondents reported a number of advocacy activities to support physiotherapists during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Requests to government to ensure access to PPE for physiotherapists. In some countries/territories member organisations donated PPE supplies to their members to assist physiotherapists practice safely.



Provide online training for physiotherapists on COVID-19 related topics (for example clinical, occupational safety).



Increased recognition of telehealth for physiotherapy services, and the need for these services to be appropriately remunerated.



Advocate for physiotherapy services to be considered an essential service during lockdown restrictions.



Campaigning for physiotherapists to be considered as frontline workers in the fight against the pandemic.



Specific work on behalf of physiotherapists in private practice so they can access compensation, financial support, and rent holidays if they had to close their premises during the early stages of the pandemic.



Lobby for the employment of more physiotherapists in the public health care systems.



Development of guidelines and other related materials to advise physiotherapists when treating people affected by COVID-19.



Long Covid

Long Covid has been defined by the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as the presence of signs and symptoms that develop during or following an infection consistent with COVID-19, which continue for 12 weeks or more, and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. This includes both ongoing symptomatic COVID-19 (from four to 12 weeks) and long term consequences of COVID-19 (12 weeks or more).³

According to WHO, with progression of the pandemic and the follow up of patients who have not been critically ill, new evidence is emerging about COVID-19 related persistent symptoms.⁴



Some people went on to develop a long-term illness with widespread pain, fatigue, depression, and sleep disturbance. Cognitive symptoms have been also described.

Some member organisations stated they have tracked biosafety, health and working conditions of health workers during the pandemic. As a result of working as part of the frontline response, many physiotherapists have become infected with COVID-19, and some have developed Long Covid.

Informal networks, offering peer support, have been set up by some physiotherapists. These networks can provide a safe space for physiotherapists to share experiences of living with Long Covid. Some members of these networks have highlighted the importance of being able to pace themselves and feel supported at all levels when returning to their workplaces.⁵

People affected by Long Covid have described it as a multi-dimensional, episodic and unpredictable condition. This makes it challenging for people to navigate their health care journey and their return to work.

Preliminary research suggests new approaches will need to address the treatment for people with Long Covid, especially in terms of managing symptoms and work loads. Further research is needed in this area.

There is a substantial role for physiotherapists to work with people affected by Long Covid in the future.



Summary

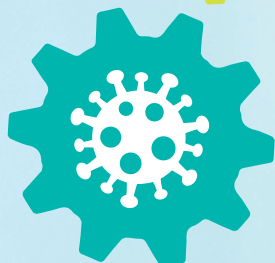
The key findings of this report can be summarised as:



Physiotherapy must be recognised as a frontline or essential health profession during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Physiotherapists play a critical role in the treatment for all phases of COVID-19.



People with long-term conditions could be particularly affected by the disruption to physiotherapy services and therefore processes should be put in place to address this issue.



Investment and recognition of physiotherapy telehealth services could be an effective way to face the challenges raised by people accessing physiotherapy services due to the COVID pandemic.



New strategies will need to be developed and implemented to address issues related to people affected by Long Covid and their rehabilitation. Physiotherapists will have a key role in this process.

References

- 1** World Physiotherapy, annual membership census 2020 [Accessed 20 November 2020] <https://world.physio/membership/profession-profile/about>
- 2** Domingo Palacios-Ceña, PhD, César Fernández-de-las-Peñas, PT, PhD, María Palacios-Ceña, PT, PhD, Ana I de-la-Llave-Rincón, PT, PhD, Lidiane L Florencio, PT, PhD, Working on the Frontlines of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study of Physical Therapists' Experience in Spain, *Physical Therapy*, 2021; pzab025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ptj/pzab025>
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- 5** Long Covid Physio website. [Accessed 1 February 2021 <https://longcovid.physio/>]





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