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REVIEW ARTICLE

Current Standards and Future Scope of Sports Physiotherapy Practice in Malaysia: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Sports physiotherapy in Malaysia has made significant strides in supporting athletes, yet it faces several challenges, including a lack of formal specialization, limited research output, and inconsistent clinical practices. The current system, while effective in high-performance sports settings, often falls short in grassroots and rural areas due to limited access to specialized care. This review discusses the regulatory framework, education, clinical practices, and ethical considerations within the Malaysian sports physiotherapy landscape. It also compares international standards and identifies key areas for growth, including the development of structured postgraduate education, evidence-based practices, and the integration of emerging technologies. The future of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia depends on addressing these gaps, with the potential to enhance both the quality and accessibility of care for athletes at all levels.

Keywords: Sports Physiotherapy; Malaysia; Clinical Standards; Postgraduate Education

1 INTRODUCTION

Sports physiotherapy is a specialized area within the field of physiotherapy that focuses on the prevention, assessment, treatment, and rehabilitation of sports-related injuries and conditions. It plays a critical role in enhancing athletic performance, reducing injury risks, and ensuring safe return-to-play decisions. As sports evolve to higher levels of competition and physical demand, the need for well-trained sports physiotherapists becomes increasingly significant. Globally, sports physiotherapy has progressed with structured educational programs, formal specialization pathways, and professional recognition through international bodies such as the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPT) and World Physiotherapy. These standards have elevated the quality of care provided to athletes across various levels of sport^{1,2}.

In Malaysia, the growth of the sports industry and increased participation in both elite and recreational sports have created a greater demand for specialized physiotherapy services. However, the development of sports physiotherapy as a recognized and regulated specialty is still in its

formative stages. While Malaysian physiotherapists have made significant contributions to national sports events and athlete care, there is limited structural framework supporting specialization, professional advancement, and national recognition.

This narrative review aims to explore the current standards of sports physiotherapy practice in Malaysia, including its educational, clinical, and regulatory components. Furthermore, it highlights the challenges faced by practitioners and discusses opportunities for future development in line with global best practices. Strengthening the foundation of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia will not only benefit athletes but also contribute to the overall advancement of the physiotherapy profession in the country.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Current Standards of Sports Physiotherapy in Malaysia

2.1.1 Regulatory Framework

Sports physiotherapy in Malaysia operates within the broader physiotherapy profession and is regulated under the Allied Health Professions Act 2016 (Act 774). While this Act mandates registration and standardizes professional conduct among physiotherapists, it does not distinguish or formally recognize sports physiotherapy as a subspecialty. The Malaysian Physiotherapy Association (MPA) plays a key role in professional development, offering CPD programs, networking opportunities, and policy advocacy. Institutions such as the National Sports Institute (NSI) also facilitate the involvement of physiotherapists in high-performance sports, particularly at national events such as SUKMA and SEA Games³.

2.1.2 Education and Certification

In most Malaysian universities, sports physiotherapy is introduced only as part of elective or optional modules within undergraduate physiotherapy programs. This limited exposure restricts comprehensive skill development in sports-related assessment and intervention. At present, there is no structured postgraduate certification or locally accredited specialization pathway in sports physiotherapy. Many practitioners seek internationally recognized courses such as the FIFA Diploma in Football Medicine, IOC Sports Physical Therapy certifications, or workshops accredited by the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPT). However, these are pursued individually, and their recognition within Malaysia remains informal⁴.

2.1.3 Clinical Roles and Practice Standards

Clinically, sports physiotherapists in Malaysia provide a wide range of services including pre-participation screening, on-field injury management, post-injury rehabilitation, and performance enhancement programs. In elite sports, they often work in multidisciplinary teams with physicians, strength and conditioning coaches, nutritionists, and psychologists. However, their involvement in community-level and amateur sports remains underdeveloped. There is also inconsistency in clinical practices such as injury documentation, decision-making on return-to-play, and implementation of evidence-based protocols, primarily due to the absence of unified national practice guidelines specific to sports physiotherapy.

2.1.4 Ethics and Professional Responsibility

Ethical practice in Malaysian sports physiotherapy is guided by the general code of conduct set by the MPA and the Allied Health Professions Act. Nonetheless, the dynamic and high-pressure environment of competitive sports introduces

unique ethical challenges. Practitioners must frequently balance competing interests, such as athlete well-being versus team performance, or confidentiality versus disclosure to coaches. Additionally, issues like anti-doping education, informed consent in high-risk play, and media exposure of injuries remain areas lacking formal ethical guidance. This underscores the need for sport-specific ethical training and standardized protocols to support physiotherapists in making sound clinical decisions.

2.2 Challenges in the Current System

2.2.1 Lack of Formal Specialization Pathways

One of the major challenges in Malaysia's sports physiotherapy landscape is the absence of a recognized specialization framework. While general physiotherapy education is well-established, there are no standardized postgraduate programs or certifications endorsed by local authorities that formally identify a physiotherapist as a "sports physiotherapist." This gap not only limits professional advancement but also hinders consistent competency standards across practitioners working in various sports settings.

2.2.2 Limited Research and Evidence-Based Practice

Research output in sports physiotherapy from Malaysia remains relatively low. Most clinical practices are based on experience or adapted from international guidelines, rather than homegrown research. The lack of published studies, injury surveillance data, or region-specific protocols limits the ability of Malaysian physiotherapists to contribute to or develop localized best practices. Furthermore, practitioners often face time and funding constraints that restrict engagement in academic research, especially those working in full-time clinical or field roles.

2.2.3 Inconsistent Access and Recognition

There is a significant urban-rural divide in access to sports physiotherapy services. While athletes in high-performance centers or urban institutions may benefit from skilled physiotherapists, those in rural or community settings often lack access to structured physiotherapy care. Moreover, outside of elite sports environments, the role of physiotherapists in sports is still undervalued and misunderstood, with many teams relying on general medical personnel or fitness trainers for injury management.

2.2.4 Ethical and Operational Pressures

Sports physiotherapists regularly face ethical challenges, particularly in balancing athlete safety with competitive demands. In the absence of sport-specific ethical protocols, physiotherapists are often left to make difficult decisions based on personal experience or informal consultation. Additionally, in high-stakes events, operational challenges such as inadequate on-field emergency equipment, limited interdisciplinary collaboration, and unclear communication

channels with coaching staff further compromise the quality of care delivered.

2.3 Comparative Global Standards

2.3.1 Australia and New Zealand

Countries like Australia and New Zealand have long established themselves as global leaders in sports physiotherapy. In Australia, the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) recognizes sports physiotherapy as an advanced area of practice. Physiotherapists can pursue Master's degrees in Sports Physiotherapy and undergo formal titling and fellowship pathways, which allow for professional recognition and career progression⁵. These programs are highly structured, incorporating academic coursework, clinical mentorship, and research involvement. Similarly, New Zealand follows a strong competency-based framework where specialization is guided by national regulations and linked to employment in elite sports organizations.

2.3.2 United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, sports physiotherapy is supported through accredited programs by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) and professional bodies like the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Sports and Exercise Medicine (ACPSEM)⁶. UK-based physiotherapists can complete postgraduate studies and move through a structured accreditation system—commonly known as the gold, silver, and bronze levels—which defines their scope, competencies, and clinical authority in the field. These frameworks are closely aligned with national sports councils and Olympic-level institutions⁷.

2.3.3 International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPT)

The IFSPT, a subgroup of World Physiotherapy, sets global standards for the education, certification, and ethical practice of sports physiotherapists. It offers international recognition for practitioners who complete approved postgraduate training and meet specific clinical hours in sports environments. Their model emphasizes standardized competencies, ethical codes, and a framework for evidence-based practice. Countries like Canada, Norway, and South Africa have aligned their national frameworks with IFSPT guidelines to ensure consistency and international mobility for their practitioners.

2.3.4 Key Lessons for Malaysia

Malaysia can benefit by adopting components of these international systems, especially in terms of establishing a structured certification pathway, promoting postgraduate education, and integrating sports physiotherapists more formally into national sports systems. Collaboration between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Higher Education,

and sports governing bodies will be essential to build a sustainable system that reflects both global standards and local needs. Introducing a tiered accreditation system or national fellowship could also uplift the profession and encourage physiotherapists to specialize confidently.

2.4 Future Scope and Opportunities

2.4.1 Advancing Education and Training

One of the most significant areas for growth in sports physiotherapy in Malaysia is the development of formal postgraduate education and specialization pathways. Establishing a Master's program in Sports Physiotherapy, recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Malaysian Physiotherapy Association (MPA), would provide physiotherapists with the knowledge and skills required for specialized practice. Additionally, establishing national certification programs would offer clear professional development routes, helping physiotherapists build their expertise and achieve recognition in the field. By incorporating elements from international education systems, Malaysia can develop homegrown experts capable of contributing to both regional and global sports physiotherapy standards.

2.4.2 Policy and System Reform

The formal recognition of sports physiotherapy as a distinct subspecialty within the physiotherapy profession is a crucial step in ensuring its future growth. Collaboration between the Ministry of Health, the National Sports Institute (NSI), and MPA could lead to the creation of national practice guidelines that define the role and scope of sports physiotherapists. Furthermore, integrating physiotherapists more formally into national sports teams and amateur leagues would provide consistent and equitable access to specialized care. Establishing these guidelines and systems will create a foundation for more standardized care, improve athlete safety, and elevate the status of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia.

2.4.3 Research and Data-Driven Practices

To advance the field of sports physiotherapy, there is a pressing need for research-driven practices. Developing a national registry for sports injuries, including data on common sports-related conditions, will help guide evidence-based decision-making. Local research on sports injuries and rehabilitation protocols can provide context-specific recommendations for practitioners. Increasing collaboration with universities, clinical research bodies, and international sports physiotherapy associations will enhance the quality and scope of research. Encouraging physiotherapists to engage in research, both through formal academic channels and clinical studies, will ensure that the practice remains up to date with global best practices.

2.4.4 Technological Integration and Innovation

The future of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia will be heavily influenced by advancements in technology. Integration of wearable technology, such as fitness trackers, smart clothing, and movement analysis tools, can help physiotherapists monitor recovery and track performance in real time. Tele-physiotherapy, which has gained popularity globally, could offer remote rehabilitation services, especially for athletes in rural or underserved areas. Furthermore, integrating technologies like neuromuscular electrical stimulation (NMES) and robot-assisted therapy into rehabilitation programs could enhance recovery times and outcomes for athletes. By embracing innovation, Malaysian sports physiotherapy can improve efficiency, accuracy, and accessibility, ensuring that athletes receive the best care, no matter their location.

3 DISCUSSION

The current state of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia reveals both significant potential and areas of improvement. While sports physiotherapists in the country play a crucial role in managing injuries and improving performance, the absence of a formal specialization framework limits the growth of the profession. The gap in postgraduate education and national certification programs means that sports physiotherapists must seek international qualifications to gain specialized knowledge, which can be both costly and time-consuming.

Another notable challenge is the lack of standardization in clinical practices, including injury assessment, rehabilitation protocols, and return-to-play decisions. This inconsistency can lead to varying outcomes for athletes, depending on the practitioner's experience and exposure to global best practices. Additionally, while urban athletes benefit from specialized sports physiotherapy services, those in rural areas often face difficulties accessing the same level of care.

Research is a critical area for future development. Malaysia currently lacks comprehensive injury surveillance systems or national research initiatives focused on sports physiotherapy. This restricts evidence-based practices and local adaptations of global guidelines. Establishing a national registry of sports injuries, alongside dedicated research funding, could help build the necessary body of evidence to improve clinical decision-making and create context-specific protocols.

Looking ahead, the integration of technology into sports physiotherapy practice holds promise for improving both access and quality of care. Wearable devices, remote rehabilitation services, and advanced rehabilitation technologies could revolutionize the way physiotherapy is delivered, particularly in underserved areas. By embracing technological advancements, Malaysia can ensure that athletes receive timely, efficient, and personalized care⁸⁻¹⁵.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while sports physiotherapy in Malaysia has made strides in supporting athletes, it still faces numerous challenges in terms of formal specialization, standardized clinical practices, and research development. The absence of structured postgraduate programs and national certification limits the professional growth of sports physiotherapists, and inconsistent practices can affect the quality of care provided to athletes. However, with the increasing recognition of the role of sports physiotherapists, coupled with advancements in education, policy, research, and technology, there is significant potential for growth in the field.

The future of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia lies in the development of a comprehensive education and certification framework, the standardization of clinical practices, and the integration of innovative technologies. By addressing these areas, Malaysia can elevate the profession, providing athletes with the specialized care they need to perform at their best and recover safely. With the right support, the field of sports physiotherapy in Malaysia can evolve to meet global standards, ultimately contributing to the health and success of athletes across the nation.

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