

Career Aspirations of Final Year Doctoral Physical Therapy Students and the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction

Background

- COVID-19 virus was identified in December 2019. In March 2020, the U.S. declared a state of emergency and the WHO labeled the disease crisis as a pandemic².
 - Prior to the pandemic, APTA workforce analysis³ predicts a future surplus vs. demand of physical therapists by 2030
 - U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics⁴ for PT workplace distribution:
 - outpatient (32%), hospitals (28%), homehealth (11%), self-employed (6%), and nursing care (6%)
 - Current evidence on career aspirations of healthcare students have identified motivators such as location, readiness for setting, and interest of patient population¹

Purpose

- Identify how events of COVID-19 pandemic may or may not have influenced physical therapy students' career aspirations

Methods

Interviews

- Participants: 8 student physical therapists (SPTs) from 4 doctoral physical therapy (DPT) programs
- Recruitment: email to selected DPT programs
- Inclusion Criteria: graduated in 2021 or within the past year
- Exclusion Criteria: graduated before May 2020 or after 2022
- Collected qualitative data through:
 - Google Meet, Zoom, Facetime, or Phone call
- Format: Nine 2-part standardized open-ended questions:
 - (1) General career aspirations
 - (2) How COVID-19 impacted the participants' aspirations.
- Analysis: Interviews manually coded using Saldana's elemental method and pattern coding

Childhood Injury
No interest in residency/fellowship
Active Lifestyle
Career focused on population or setting
Evolution of values/beliefs
Decreased ambition related to externals

DPT program assisted with resources
Hybrid vs. traditional DPT program
Unsure how APTA helps
APTA membership
Self-advocating for career goals
Networking



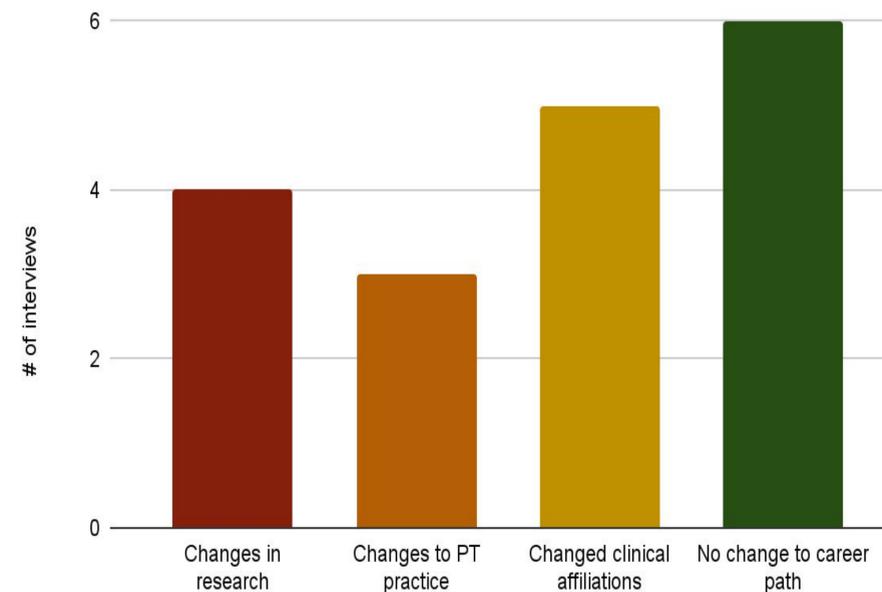
Positive experience with PT
Positive relationship with faculty
Positive family influence on career
Influential clinical instructor
Learning from classmates
Negative experiences from COVID-19

Wound care is technical and gross
Cardiopulmonary crosses disciplines
Pelvic health PT is personal and niche

"There's definitely a push for COVID research; we're in year two of the pandemic and we're still seeing different effects"

"I think it will change how we practice later on because we're still learning the effects of what COVID does to the body"

Impacts of COVID-19



"I ended up just combining clinical rotations; I was at the same facility for 6 months because it was really hard to find placements due to COVID"

"Some of my education has been hindered by COVID, but I don't think it's changed my path of what I want and that's to be a PT"

Results

- Career aspiration decisions were dominated by setting/population interest or values
- Internal and external motivators contributed to aspirations
- Exposures included classroom clinicals, extracurricular activities, and job/work experiences
- Qualitative analysis demonstrated:
 - No change to career path due to COVID-19
 - Negative impact on clinical experiences
 - Anticipation of change in research trends

Conclusion & Discussion

- COVID-19 pandemic impacted DPT students experience
 - Decreased:
 - Exposure to various settings, patient populations, and interactions with peers/faculty
 - Increased:
 - Future research/education in cardiopulmonary field
 - Interest in research, various specialties, and values in career search
- COVID-19 did not change DPT students career aspirations
- Limitations include:
 - A small sample size for interviews
 - 7 traditional DPT students vs. 1 hybrid DPT student
 - Potential coding bias

References

1. Burnett K, Armer N, Baker P. The career aspirations and expectations of student physician associates in the UK. *Future Healthcare J.* 2019. Accessed December 20, 2020.
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3. Tepper DE. Opportunities exist in projected workforce demand. <https://www.apta.org/apta-magazine/2021/04/01/opportunities-exist-in-projected-workforce-demand>. Updated April 1, 2021. Accessed November 2, 2021.
4. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational outlook handbook: Physical Therapists. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm#tab-3>. Updated September 8, 2021. Accessed November 2, 2021.