Oral Communication

OC-70

Undergraduate Rehabilitation Education: An action step toward Rehabilitation 2030 and the World Health Assembly Resolution

Topic: Education (Medical Student, Residency & Post-Graduate)

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BACKGROUND

Rehabilitation 2030 endeavors to better equip health systems globally by incorporating rehabilitation services. A 2023 World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution solidified the importance of these services by drafting a list of commitments by member states to act on. One of the documented concerns is the need to expand the rehabilitation workforce internationally.

CASE DESCRIPTION

By acknowledging rehabilitation as an essential health service for all ages, Rehabilitation 2030 is a worldwide call to action to recognize the full continuum of care - public health, medicine, and rehabilitation. The purpose of this presentation is to express the need for post-secondary, or undergraduate rehabilitation education (URE) programs, to help meet rehabilitation workforce needs. This approach to training rehabilitation practitioners may be especially important in low and middle-income countries, where the disability burden and the lack of awareness of rehabilitation among health care providers are greatest. URE academic programs (e.g., certificates, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees) can develop practitioners with an expediency and financial efficiency that graduate programs cannot.

Rehabilitation disciplines, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and rehabilitation psychology, typically require graduate degrees and other credentials for practice in the Global North. In the 1960s, Dr. Kenneth Hylbert of Penn State University launched a bachelor of rehabilitation degree to meet the "vast unmet needs of certain disability groups." The goal was to prepare students to address the "lack of professional manpower" and were trained as entry-level generalists.

The WHA's resolution specifically commended Namibia for their provision of "financial incentives for people taking up studies in the rehabilitation field." The Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) lists Occupational Therapy, Orthotics/Prosthetics, Physiotherapy, and others as undergraduate "scarce health professions." Similarly, the Rehabilitation Services Administration is a source of federal funding in the U.S. for rehabilitation counseling students.

DISCUSSION

Students with access to funding will be more inclined to enroll in URE programs, especially if future salaries won't justify student debt. Students exposed to rehabilitation earlier in their academic careers are more likely to choose and stay with that career path. Current rehabilitation academic programs should explore ways to develop URE programming, in support of Rehabilitation 2030.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening the rehabilitation workforce internationally will require micro, meso, and macro level interventions that explore student interests, community health needs, capacities of institutions of higher education, and resources within governments and funding sources. WHO member states are obligated to explore sustainable ways to complete the continuum of care worldwide.

Statement of Disclosures

None

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