

Awareness among Physiotherapy Students, Interns, and Clinical Practitioners of Gujarat regarding Care of Transgender People after Gender Affirmation Surgery

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Abstract: *The transgender community is a trivialised population in medicine which faces unwarranted challenges. This study was conducted to examine the awareness about pelvic floor rehabilitation post vaginoplasty among physiotherapy students, interns and clinicians. Women's health is a part of the undergraduate syllabus of physiotherapy and yet only 20% of the respondents were aware regarding postoperative pelvic floor rehabilitation protocol post-vaginoplasty. Out of 100 participants screened only 18% were trained for care of the transgender community. This establishes the need to improve the quality of care provided to them, inculcation of vaginoplasty and its rehabilitation in academic curriculum of Physiotherapy, This is the need of the hour as the world is undergoing an inclusive transition from disparaging the transgender community to acknowledging and accepting them.*

Keywords: Physiotherapy, Transgender, Gender Affirmation

1. Introduction

Gender affirmation surgery (GAS) is a collection of surgical procedures performed in patients presenting with diagnosis of Gender Incongruence (Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, American Psychiatric Association) (1). Gender affirmation surgery aims to surgically align physical characteristics with one's identity. These surgical interventions target sex-specific physical characteristics such as genitals (e.g., vaginoplasty), chest (eg., mastectomy), face, gonads, and voice. (2) In the United States of America, there has been a marked year-by-year increase in utilisation of surgical services by the transgender community. (3) Some of the common complications of vaginoplasty are pelvic floor dysfunction, vaginismus, vaginal prolapse, urinary or fecal incontinence, constipation.

The aim of the study was to evaluate the awareness among final year physiotherapy students, interns, and clinical practitioners regarding care of transgender people after gender affirmation surgery. For this purpose, a descriptive study was conducted, administered to final year physical therapy students, interns, and clinical practitioners, to gauge their awareness levels regarding the treatment options and approaches available post gender affirmation surgery.

2. Methodology

This research utilized a descriptive research methodology. A questionnaire was created and face validated by experts and their feedback was inculcated. The questionnaire was prepared on Google form and circulated via various social media platforms to physical therapy undergraduate final year

students, interns, and physiotherapy clinical practitioners. The responses were collected and interpreted in the context of awareness about GAS and post-operative rehabilitation.

3. Result

The number of respondents were 100 and 79% of respondents were in the age group of 20-22, 8% from 18-20 years of age, 9% from 22-24 years of age, and 4% were 24 years and above. From all the responses 74% were final year undergraduate (UG) students, 9% were clinical practitioners, 17% were interns. This study revealed that physical therapy management of vaginoplasty was not included in 85% of students' college or university education. Out of all the participants screened only 18% were trained regarding care of the transgender community. Majority (68%) of the respondents were unaware about the complications of vaginoplasty. We also found that from all the participants screened 63% of the respondents were unaware regarding the pronouns used by the transgender community. 88% of the respondents would like to gain further knowledge regarding care of the transgender community.

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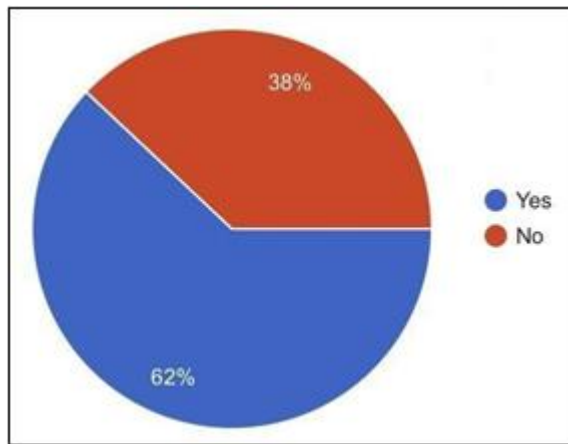


Figure 1: Responses about awareness of vaginoplasty

The survey revealed that 46% of respondents were completely unaware regarding pelvic floor rehab protocol post vaginoplasty while 20% were aware, and 34% were unsure.

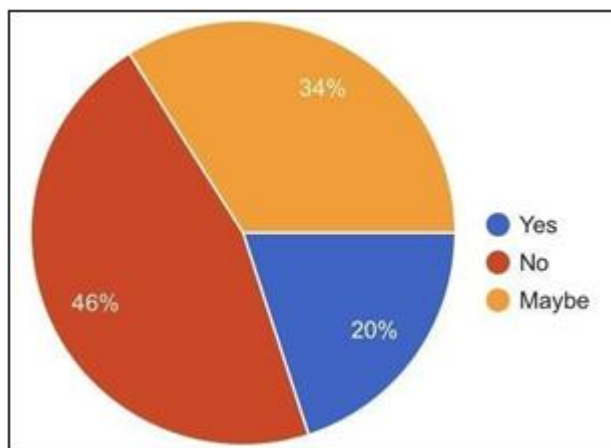


Figure 2: Responses to care of post-operative vaginoplasty patients

4. Discussion

The transgender community faces multiple barriers regarding their healthcare needs, ranging from historical stigmatization, to discrimination, and gate-keeping from the medical community. (4) Our study revealed that, there is a lack of awareness regarding care of transgender community among physical therapy students, interns, and clinical practitioners. This lack of awareness could be assumed to be due lack of inclusion of care of the transgender community in the women's health curriculum of physical therapy undergraduate course as seen in our survey. A study conducted by the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, with data collected in september 2008 and march 2009 demonstrated that the largest barrier reported by transgender individuals was the paucity of knowledgeable providers. 50% of the sample reported having to teach their medical providers about transgender care. The study also concluded that 23% of openly transgender people were denied service altogether compared to 15% of those who were not out or partly out. (5) (6) This study belongs to a developed country (i. e., US) and our study is done in a developing country.

In a recent study conducted on knowledge of nurses regarding transgender patient care it was revealed that many respondents were uncertain about what was meant by the term "transgender" and confused it with sexual orientation. Overall, the findings revealed that although some nurses were familiar with transgender lives and health, the majority of the nurses lacked sufficient knowledge and understanding to be able to provide adequate care, and held misconceptions about transgender patients and their potential healthcare needs. (7)

In a study by Tiffany K Roberts et al; it was shown that Healthcare providers acknowledge that information is lacking regarding the unique needs and long-term outcomes for transgender patients, which contributes to the inability to provide appropriate care (8). Final year students and interns will be practicing physical therapists soon, and if they are not formally taught regarding transgender care then that will lead to substandard treatment of this community. A study by Joshua D Safer et al. proved that a simple change in the content of second year medical school curriculum significantly increased students' self-reported willingness to care for transgender patients (9). The world is shifting towards non-binary gender and inclusivity, but the practising health care professionals are not trained for it as shown in our study. Emphasis has been put on the evaluation of gender affirming surgery approaches and their effectiveness, extensive research is absent regarding the role of physical therapists after completion of these interventions. Research is also yet needed regarding the awareness levels in physical therapists for treatment of patients having undergone Gender affirmation surgery.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the majority of the respondents were unaware about the complications of vaginoplasty. Further studies can be done in other parts of India regarding awareness of transgender care and need for measures to improve standard of physiotherapy care and education.

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