INTRODUCTION

The Education and Scholarship Track in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a collaboration between the University of North Carolina (UNC), Division of Physical Therapy (PT) and the Greater Carolinas Chapter of the National MS Society. The evidence suggests that PT intervention for individuals with MS results in decreased falls and increased ability to manage symptoms.

OBJECTIVES

The goal of this initiative was to enhance the knowledge and awareness among NC neurologists regarding PT interventions for falls prevention and symptom management in patients with MS. The desired outcome was to increase potential neurologist referral of patients with MS to PT.

METHODS

Evidence-based handouts were created to provide information and references for neurologists regarding positive outcomes of PT intervention for individuals with MS. Handouts were piloted through distribution to local neurologists in attendance at the NC Neurological Society annual meeting. One handout focused on management of fatigue, heat sensitivity, spasticity, and functional mobility deficits. The second handout addressed fall prevention in terms of vestibular exercise, core and lower extremity strengthening. Neurologists read the handouts and completed pre/post surveys according to current practice (setting, MS caseload, PT referral rates, rationale for referral, barriers, and influence of the handouts on PT referrals).

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Of the 42 neurologists that filled out the pre-survey and received the handout and post-survey, 30 returned a post-survey to a box that facilitated a more candid response. The most common barriers to PT referral included: lack of awareness of local PTs knowledgeable in MS (12%), financial concerns associated with the cost of PT (12%), and perception that newly diagnosed patients will not benefit from PT services (10%). Ninety percent of neurologists that completed the post-survey reported that they would consider increasing the number of patients with MS referred to PT. Eighty-three percent reported that the handout influenced their awareness and knowledge of the role of PT in managing symptoms of MS. Seventy-seven percent reported that the handout influenced their awareness and knowledge of the role of PT in reducing fall risk in people with MS.

Figure 1: Neurologist Demographics

Figure 2: Neurologist Reasons for Referral (Pre and Post)

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that a concise evidence-based handout can influence neurologists’ awareness and perception of the benefits of PT for people with MS. Pre-survey results revealed that the most common areas for neurologist referral to PT included fall risk, gait mobility training, and strength training. Areas that showed the lowest referral rates included fatigue, heat sensitivity, and wellness programming, creating the most potential for improvement when provided supportive evidence. Post-survey data revealed that the influence of the evidence-based handout was greatest in these three areas. The perception that newly diagnosed patients will not benefit from PT services was specifically addressed in this handout with information regarding wellness programs, strength training, and fall prevention. The Education and Scholarship Track in MS is working toward educating local PTs and raising awareness of PT interventions that benefit people with MS.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study suggest that given a concise evidence-based handout, neurologists’ perceptions of the role of PT in MS can be influenced. Given the influence of this pilot study, future research should be done to determine the impact of larger scale presentations and education in medical schools and residency programs. Future studies should be conducted to investigate actual changes in referral rates and patterns related to PT for MS.

SUMMARY OF USE

This unique Education and Scholarship Track in MS addresses the challenges of people living with MS through specialized training for DPT students at UNC-Chapel Hill. It is our goal that this curriculum will serve as a collaborative educational model for other universities and organizations to meet the needs of students interested in a particular patient population, as well as increase access for populations in need of specialized PT care.

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