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Byrd, E. (2022). Exploring the Confidence and Attitudes of Physiotherapy Students in the United Kingdom to Work with People Experiencing Mental Illness. In *Abstracts of the 9th International Organisation of Physical Therapy in Mental Health Conference* (pp. 90). Article Oral Presentation 16 Advance online publication.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:

Abstracts of the 9th International Organisation of Physical Therapy in Mental Health Conference

Publication Status:

Published online: 30/11/2022

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Exploring the Confidence and Attitudes of Physiotherapy Students in the United Kingdom to Work with People Experiencing Mental Illness

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Abstract

Physiotherapists across all specialities are likely to treat patients with comorbid mental illness with potential increased regularity. Positive attitudes and confidence in managing people experiencing mental ill health is therefore vital for student physiotherapists to develop. A mixed methodological study, including a web-based survey and 1:1 semi-structured interview, was conducted with UK physiotherapy students (n=148) exploring confidence, perceptions and attitudes to working with people experiencing mental illness. Overall confidence levels (0-100 scale) to work with people experiencing mental illness was 35.6 (\pm 21.9). Seventy four percent of students reported <4 hours of curriculum coverage on mental health disorders (MHDs). Of the respondents 11.4% reported experience of a mental health clinical placement. Students who reported spending \geq 5 hours covering MHDs within the curriculum compared to <5 hours demonstrated significantly higher confidence levels ($t(97) = 2.71, p = .008$). Resources identified as beneficial in increasing student confidence included increased clinical experience and more teaching coverage. Analysis of qualitative interviews identified five major themes: Utilising different pedagogical approaches to boost awareness (1); Competence from experience (2); Integrating the physical and the psychological in teaching and practice (3); Time: there is no magic number (4); and Developing the Curricula (5). Pre-registration physiotherapy students demonstrate a lack of confidence to work with people experiencing mental illness. Increased exposure within teaching and clinical experience was identified both quantitatively and qualitatively to increase confidence levels. Recommendations to increase student confidence include increasing curriculum coverage through directed teaching, case-based learning, an integrated approach to physical and mental health and simulation experiences.

