

Standards of the Physical Therapy Role in the NICU: Reviewing Official Sources in the Western World and in Israel

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Abstract

The NICU is a complex work environment containing a sensitive population whose treatment requires specific skills and competencies, advanced clinical training, and multi-disciplinary collaboration. The physical therapist is part of the multi-disciplinary team in the NICU. Involvement of the physical therapy profession in the NICU includes unique roles; the physical therapist provides developmental and respiratory therapy with reference to the various body systems including the autonomic system, as well as the sensory-motor, self-regulation, and attention systems. Physiotherapy in the NICU is based on in-depth medical and developmental knowledge and research integrating the developmental care approach. This requires role definitions, professional criteria, and advanced clinical training, as described in official clinical practice guidelines and position papers. This review examines the roles of the neonatal physical therapist in Israel, comparing them to international standards in the western world, considering role definitions, required skills and competencies for clinical training, and evaluation tools used.

The results compared the Israeli Standardized Practice to official sources dealing with physical therapists' role definitions in the NICU in the US, UK, Australia, and

New Zealand. Official sources reviewed described the physical therapist's responsibilities in applying developmental care, orthopedic treatment, and assessment, with some tangential and some unique to role delineation among different disciplines.¹⁰ Guidelines differ from each other in the level of detail and emphases given to various aspects of role responsibilities. They also differ in the scope and manner of specific training requirements, clinical "on site" guidance, and gradual entry to the NICU. When comparing recommendations for evaluation tools, the Israeli Standardized Practice differs from the other sources in indicating the need for using them without specifying the tests and measures. Sources that do include references for appropriate evaluation tools for the NICU phase mention different tools that vary in type, age range for implementation, and training requirements. The sources reviewed did not adequately define recommendations for procedures regulating requirements for the involvement of physical therapists.

The research recommendations include the development of standardized practice guidelines in the local context and may encourage professional endeavors to further develop and promote the physical therapy field in preterm care. As a way of broadening the scope even further, future studies should focus on mapping the physical therapist's roles in NICUs in Israel.

Keywords: Guidelines, Standards, Position papers, Clinical practice, Physical therapist role, training, Areas of knowledge, Multi-disciplinary collaboration, evaluation tools for the NICU