The impact of sport psychology education on the practice of physiotherapists

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Introduction
The occurrence of a sports injury can lead to several negative psychological reactions such as frustration, anger, anxiety, and depression (e.g. Carson & Polman, 2008; Tracey, 2003). Sport psychology intervention has been shown to benefit sports injury rehabilitation (Armatis et al., 2007; Levy et al., 2006), however, it would appear that deficiencies in the training of sports physiotherapists in this area may be acting as a barrier to injured athletes receiving sport psychology support during rehabilitation. Generally research has shown that physiotherapists recognise the importance of psychological factors, but lack the training to utilise sport psychology (Aravin-Barrow et al., 2007). Within the research in this field there is almost universal agreement that the training of sports injury rehabilitation professionals (SRPs), including physiotherapists, in sport psychology is inadequate (e.g. Aravin-Barrow et al., 2010; Heaney, 2006), and SRPs consistently express a desire to develop their knowledge of sport psychology theory and practice (e.g. Aravin-Barrow et al., 2007; Heaney, 2006).

In light of these findings it has been suggested that sport psychology education is likely to have a positive impact on the sport psychology related behaviours of SRPs (Aravin-Barrow et al., 2007; Hamson-Ulley, et al., 2008; Heaney, 2006). However, to date, only a limited number of studies (Harris et al., 2005; Clement & Shannon, 2009; Stillier-Ostrowski et al., 2008; Perez & Sacks, 1997) have delivered a sport psychology education package and measured its impact and all have examined US athletic trainer populations, with the majority of these being student populations. This would suggest that further research is needed to examine a broader range of SRPs, including those who are already qualified, since it has been suggested that those already qualified are also in need of sport psychology training (Aravin-Barrow et al., 2007; Hamson-Ulley et al., 2008; Heaney, 2006).

Objective: The purpose of this investigation was to examine the impact of a sport psychology education package on qualified UK physiotherapists working in sport.

Method
Participants
The participants were 135 physiotherapists who responded to an invitation to participate in the study. Sixty-seven were randomly assigned to the intervention group (sport psychology) group and 68 participants were randomly assigned to the control group. Of these 135 physiotherapists 95% completed four stages of post-module follow-up (44 intervention group and 51 control group) and only data from these participants are analysed in the study. The intervention group (n=44) comprised 23 males and 21 females and had a mean age of 33.70 years (SD = 8.16). The control group (n=51) comprised 26 males and 25 females and had a mean age of 36.11 years (SD = 8.78).

Measures
Data was collected through a series of online questionnaires completed on four occasions over a six month period (1 pre-module questionnaire and 3 post-module questionnaires). The questionnaires were split into three main sections:

(i) The Attitudes About Imagery Survey (AAS) (Harms-Ulley et al., 2008), which measured participants’ attitudes regarding the effectiveness of mental skills during sports injury rehabilitation

(ii) Psychology of Injury Usage Survey (PIUS) (Stillier-Ostrowski et al., 2009), which measured participants’ use of sport psychology skills and techniques

(iii) Supplementary information - The content of this section varied between the four questionnaires, but included areas such as demographic information, referral to a sport psychologist, further study, perceived use of sport psychology and perceptions of the module.

Procedure
After completing an informed consent form participants were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the control group and asked to complete the pre-module version of the questionnaire. Upon completing this questionnaire participants were given the web address for their specific module and asked to commence the study. The participants were given a specific date by which they should complete the module, which was four weeks after the start date.

Participants in the intervention group studied an online module entitled ‘Sport Psychology for Physiotherapists’. This module was split into three units and required approximately 12 hours of study. Participants in the control group studied an online module entitled ‘Strength and Conditioning for Physiotherapists’, which was similar to the module ‘Sport Psychology for Physiotherapists’ in terms of structure, length, delivery and assessment, but contained no sport psychology content.

The modules invited participants to complete three assessments and participate in the module forum and data was collected on participants’ engagement in these activities. Those successfully completing all three assessments were awarded a certificate of completion.

Results
The total score on the PIUS questionnaire over time for the two participant groups is summarised in the graph below.*

Use of Sport Psychology
The total score on the PIUS questionnaire over time for the two participant groups is summarised in the graph below.*

Sport Psychology Referral
Prior to commencing study, participants were asked if they had ever referred an injured athlete to a sport psychologist (PRE). Following the completion of the module (POST1) participants were asked if they had made a referral during the course of the module, and then finally 3-months (POST2) and 6-months after completing the module. The referral rates are presented in the table below.

Perceptions of the Module
Data was collected regarding participants’ perceptions of the module. Firstly, immediately following completion of the module (POST1), participants were asked to rate how beneficial they found the module on a scale of 1-10. The ratings given by the participants are summarised below.

In addition to the PIUS data, participants in the sport psychology group were also asked whether they felt they had used more sport psychology since studying the module. As can be seen from the table below, this perceived usage was high and relatively consistent across the 6 month period following the completion of the module.

Psychology Module – Likes:

Psychology Module – Dislikes:

Discussion/Conclusions
Preliminary data analysis suggests that studying the sport psychology module had a positive impact on the physiotherapists, with both attitudes towards and use of sport psychology improving following completion of the module. Most significantly use of sport psychology strategies was maintained during the six months following the completion of the module indicating a positive longitudinal effect.

Whilst referral to a sport psychologist was higher pre-module, this is most likely due to the preface. The pre-questions related to whether they had ever referred an athlete to a sport psychologist ever (and thus could span a period of many years), whilst the post-questions related to whether any referrals had been made during the study (and thus only referred to the period between the two points). There is some support for this in the qualitative data and in the increasing trend seen in the POST1 to POST3 stages (which is more marked for the psychology group).

Perceptions of the module were also positive with the vast majority of participants giving the module a score of 7 or above, and motivations to undertake further study being relatively high. The fact that the undertaking of further study was higher in the control group is likely due to the fact that there are more formal learning opportunities available in strength and conditioning than sport psychology.

Overall the findings suggest that sport psychology education is of benefit to physiotherapists and indicate that sport psychology CPD courses should be more widely available to practising physiotherapists.

References

The Open University
The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK 7 6AA
Email: caroline.heaney@open.ac.uk / Tel: 01908-653703