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Is Vision Essential to Physical Therapist Practice? Perceptions of Interested Parties in DPT Education

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PURPOSE / HYPOTHESIS:
To explore the perceptions of students, faculty, staff, and clinicians regarding visual impairment, developed through interaction with a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) student with visual impairment.

SUBJECTS: 36 Participants
(20 students, 11 faculty, 2 staff, 3 clinical instructors)

MATERIALS & METHODS:
• JM is currently a licensed PT who practices in an outpatient orthopedic clinic.
• A retrospective survey was sent to 74 people who interacted with JM as a DPT student.
• 36 participants rated their perceptions before, during, and after interactions with JM on 10 statements, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

RESULTS: Differences between Ratings
There was a significant increase in all 10 of the Likert scale questions, X²(2) = 38.00 to 59.42, p < 0.001. Three themes emerged: accommodations, personal qualities, and setting; with the overarching theme of shifting the perception that vision is essential to physical therapist practice.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION:
• The shift in perception from strongly agree to disagree that vision is essential for physical therapist practice is important.
• Through interacting with JM perceptions changed from one of inability to capability.
• Statements 2-10 ratings changed to agree or strongly agree that a person with BVI could safely examine, evaluate, and treat patients.
• Clinical Instructors were willing to supervise JM.
• Clinical accommodations were not burdensome.
• "Essential functions" regarding vision and physical therapist practice should be re-considered within the context of the individual’s characteristics and lived experiences.

The perception that vision is essential to physical therapist practice shifted after interactions with a DPT student with visual impairment.

RESULTS: Open-ended Questions
Three themes emerged: accommodations, personal qualities, and setting; with the overarching theme of shifting the perception that vision is essential to physical therapist practice.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Statement 1: Vision is an essential function required to perform physical therapy practice.
Statement 2: A blind DPT student will be able to safely evaluate and treat patients.
Statement 3: Contacting academic supervisors, a blind DPT student will be able to proficiently complete assignments requiring reading or watching videos.
Statement 4: A blind DPT student will be able to accurately perform tests and measures (i.e., blood pressure, goniometry, sensation testing).
Statement 5: A blind DPT student will be able to accurately perform analysis of movement and gait that traditionally rely on visual observation.
Statement 6: A blind DPT student will be able to competently treat patients throughout their treatment plan.
Statement 7: Clinicians will be willing to supervise a blind student during a clinical experience.
Statement 8: If the clinician, a blind DPT student will be able to proficiently complete chart review and patient documentation.
Statement 9: A blind DPT graduate will be able to work classified employment as a physical therapist.
Statement 10: The clinics, reasonable accommodations for a blind DPT student will be easy to provide.

"As [JM] and I worked on ways to interpret a patient’s movement, I have come to the understanding that while vision absolutely helps with clinical efficiency, it may not be as essential to practice PT."

"All of my perceptions changed regarding [JM] and their abilities. I did not understand previously how a blind person could function as a PT but [JM] flourished. I was awed at how the program accommodated [them] to promote [their] different learning style."

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Notable Quotes:

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