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Connecting with the Global Physiotherapy Community: Reflections on Recent Experiences

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Physiotherapy has experienced remarkable global growth since its inception in 1851. With the profession's expansion, World Physiotherapy, formerly the World Confederation for Physical Therapy, has emerged as the authoritative body representing this discipline. Comprising 125 member organizations and boasting a global network of 660,794 registered physiotherapists (World Physiotherapy, 2023), this organization is pivotal in advancing the field. In line with its core principles of connecting, belonging, empowering, and collaborating, the World Physiotherapy organizes a biennial world congress featuring diverse session formats tailored to cater to the specific needs and interests of the global physiotherapy community. The 21st World Physiotherapy Congress was held hybrid, with sessions in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (June 2-4), and online (June 23-25). This unique approach allowed participants worldwide to engage in the congress in person or virtually, promoting inclusivity and accessibility. This editorial article will explore the reflections of selected Filipino bursary recipients recently participating in the World Physiotherapy Congress 2023.

Scientific conferences are meticulously organized with the intention of not only facilitating informal learning experiences but also fostering the establishment of enduring and productive communities of practice and valuable opportunities for developing robust social networks among participants (Spilker, Prinsen & Kalz, 2020). In line with this, Cenidoza and Borrás' recent participation in the congress highlighted the exposure they gained and their enhanced understanding of the diverse challenges faced and innovative approaches implemented by physiotherapists from different countries. They reflect on this experience by stating:

“The discussion about healthcare disparities has opened my mind to individuals from low-income countries facing challenges in accessing healthcare. As physiotherapists, our job responsibilities do not end with treating patients; we are also responsible for educating them. The Congress, as a whole, helped broaden my understanding of our profession.” – Cenidoza, MSYP.

“Through the exchange of narratives related to challenges in our practice, approaches in resolving professional dilemmas and innovations in sports science and rehabilitation, we become more aligned with and committed to our purpose as a physical therapy specialization.” – Borrás, MAL.

These reflections highlight the importance of actively pursuing new and diverse learning experiences. In this regard, scientific conferences assume a critical role by granting participants access to a broad spectrum of content and invaluable opportunities to engage with speakers and attendees who contribute diverse experiences and expertise (Mata, Latham, & Ransome, 2010). By offering a platform for knowledge exchange and networking, these conferences enable professionals to broaden their understanding, expand their perspectives, and explore innovative ideas.

Another reflection emphasizes the profound sense of belonging experienced during the congress. Despite participants' diverse backgrounds and interests, Bautista highlights that the shared passion for the profession fostered a feeling of ease and connection within the global physiotherapy community. Bautista expresses this sentiment by stating:

“My favorite part of the Congress is the opening and the closing program. I experienced a sense of awe and connection to physical therapists around the globe. Of course, I did not speak to or meet each of them, but to be in the same room with different backgrounds, cultures, and specialties and the same primary goal, improving professional practice. I enjoyed the Indaba sessions, but they were quite short. It was beautiful listening to people from different countries.” – Bautista, LAD.

The sense of belonging is closely related to feelings of connectedness and experiencing acceptance, respect, and value within a community (Switch & Ross, 2022). Being aware of one's inclusion in a larger community with a significant purpose has been associated with several positive outcomes for professionals and students, including increased satisfaction, well-being, and personal growth (Stebbleton, Soria & Huesman, 2014; Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000).

Another reflection highlighted the significant opportunity for collaboration that the congress provides. Petil's participation in the congress allowed him to connect with esteemed professionals worldwide and establish a network for future educational and research collaborations. Petil reflects on this experience by stating:

“Having been awarded a bursary from the World Physiotherapy Congress 2023, Dubai UAE, I was able to experience an immersive and rewarding encounter that offered numerous chances to engage with esteemed professionals in the field. Collaborating with fellow bursary recipients and professionals from diverse backgrounds cultivated a robust network and offered invaluable insights into global perspectives on physiotherapy.” – Petil, E.D., Jr.

Through informal discussions among professionals with shared interests, collaboration often begins informally after specific practice area sessions. These informal conversations are crucial starting points for more formal collaborations on institutional projects or research initiatives. Collaboration resulting from attendance at scientific conferences has been associated with improved prospects for funding, visibility, and prestige and is an essential tool for mentoring and professional development (Aguilar et al., 2013).

With an enhanced understanding, a revitalized sense of belonging, and a newfound inspiration to collaborate, another notable reflection that surfaced was the feeling of empowerment following the congress. Gabrieleles articulated that her congress experience had reignited her passion for the profession, propelling her to become more inspired and actively engaged in effecting lasting change and making a significant impact within her practice and country. This sense of empowerment gained from the congress serves as a driving force for Gabrieleles, propelling her towards making positive contributions and driving advancements in her professional domain. Gabrieleles expressed her sentiment by stating:

“The congress will be the catalyst for me to ignite my passion in the PT profession so that I can reach more people through connection, education, and provision of quality rehabilitation services. I will be a role model to my PT colleagues, students, patients, and other parts of the rehabilitation team so that I can contribute to improving quality health services that people deserve.” – Gabrieleles, M.A.

Empowered professionals exhibit characteristics such as a heightened sense of contribution, control, competence, connection, and meaningfulness, which have a positive impact on their interactions with various stakeholders within the profession (Jovanović, Jovčić & Stojanović-Jovanović, 2021). Attending a scientific conference and experiencing a sense of empowerment provides professionals

with the capacity to make substantial changes to their practice, both at an individual and institutional level, thereby contributing to the profession.

In conclusion, the recent World Physiotherapy Congress 2023 is a testament to the organization's unwavering commitment to fostering connections, promoting a sense of belonging, empowering individuals, and facilitating collaboration within the global physiotherapy community. The reflections shared by Filipino bursary recipients shed light on the transformative experiences that attending such conferences offers, including exposure to diverse issues, a profound sense of belonging, opportunities for collaboration, and a renewed sense of empowerment. These reflections underscore the profound significance of the World Physiotherapy Congress as a platform for connecting with the global physiotherapy community, enabling the continuous learning, nurturing meaningful connections, and empowering professionals to drive positive change in their practice, thereby contributing to the overall advancement of the profession.

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