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Where history is concerned: an editorial for the special issue on physiotherapy history

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Over the last few years, we have seen much more interest in the history of physiotherapy from within the profession. With the publication of several centenary commemorations, it seems the profession has begun to consider how physiotherapy became historically possible. And although it lags behind the enormous industry that is medical and nursing history, physiotherapy can now claim at least a modest appreciation for the conditions, events, and people that have established physiotherapy as the profession it is today.

It is timely, then, that we offer the first special issue of *Physiotherapy Theory and Practice* dedicated to physiotherapy history. Perhaps it would have been impossible to compile a particular issue before now because it is only recently that the community of physiotherapy historians has come together and began to discuss the breadth of historical studies currently going on in the profession. The formation of the International Physiotherapy History Association (www.history.physio) has meant that physiotherapy historians, researchers, students, and teachers now have a growing and viable community, and a forum to promote what has always been a very small and niche subspecialty within the profession.

For that community to grow, we could do worse than learn from our sisters and brothers in nursing and medicine, who have, for many years, catalogued, celebrated, commemorated, and critiqued their professions through the lens of history¹ (Aldersey-Williams, 2013; Couter and Stein, 2014; D'Antonio, Fairman, and Whelan, 2013; Foth, Lange, and Smith, 2018; Linker, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Reverby, 2014). I recently attended a lecture given by a professor in the history of nursing in the UK, whose work focused on the experiences of nurses in the First World War. The paper that she gave was a variation on a keynote delivered at an international nursing history conference a few weeks earlier, and she was invited to New Zealand as part of a national celebration of nursing history. Physiotherapy is some

way away from having professors of physiotherapy history and international conferences on the history of the profession. But having nursing and medical historians preceding us, does at least give us the advantage of being able to learn from their experience.

This is not to say, of course, that physiotherapy does not have historians or histories of its work. Alongside centenary histories, we have strong academic scholarship from people like Anders Ottosson (Ottosson, 2005, 2011, 2016a, 2016b); Thomas Terlouw (Terlouw, 2007a, 2007b); Beth Linker (Linker, 2005a, 2005b, 2011, 2012, 2013); and others (Benjamin, 2015; Dixon, 2003; Gilman, 2014; Ingham, Mohr, Walker, and Mabey, 2013; Moffatt, 2012; Morus, 1999; Wikström-Grotell, Broberg, Ahonen, and Eriksson, 2013; Yoshida, 2013). However, we have no public historians of physiotherapy history like Roy Porter (Porter, 1990, 1997), and it is rare to see historians outside the profession itself showing an interest in physiotherapy's development as a profession, as we have seen elsewhere (Borthwick, 1999; Bacon and Borthwick, 2012; Fournier, 2002; Nettleton, 1992, 1994; Rose, 1996, 2001; Saks, 2001, 2003).

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the fact that there are few heroic figures in physiotherapy. There are no Pasteurs or Nightingales in the profession; no real innovators or radical thinkers. The profession lacks the kinds of mythologies that surround prominent professions like medicine, nursing, and psychotherapy, and it has experienced few conceptual leaps or dramatic breakthroughs. Some have made the case that physiotherapy experienced a gendered 'rupture' at the end of the 19th-century (Ottosson, 2016a), and others have argued for the transformative effect of World War I and the polio epidemics (Linker, 2011; Murphy, 1995). I have argued that the neoliberal economic turn in the 1970s radically reshaped the modern profession (Nicholls, 2017), but in all cases, physiotherapy largely remained the same, only adapting to a different set of cultural, economic, political, and social conditions. The opening up of healthcare

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markets in the 1960s certainly made it possible for pioneers like Kaltenborn, Maitland, McKenzie, and Mulligan to prosper. Still, it would be hard to equate their innovations with Galen, Avicenna, Harvey, Lister, Koch, Nightingale, or Freud.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has heightened our awareness of physiotherapy in a time of crisis. What we know from history is that physiotherapy has prospered as a result of war and pestilence, mainly because these catastrophes produced ongoing disability and suffering that needed managing. For much of human history, there were no centralized services for ill or injured people. Still, developed economies have been able to sustain public healthcare services like physiotherapists for more than a century now. What we know less of is how exactly physiotherapists managed. Archival records of the day-to-day work of physiotherapists are so limited that one might be forgiven for thinking that practitioners in the past were so concerned with doing therapy, that they neglected to record or account for their work. We know little, for instance, about the effect that polio had on hydrotherapy. Water-based treatments were hugely popular throughout the 19th and early 20th century, and we know it was a mainstay of treatments for the recovery phases of polio. But polio was also a water-borne disease, and many public baths and communal water supplies were heavily restricted. These details might not seem useful, except that we are now facing the long tail of recovery from an airborne pathogen that is having a significant effect on people's proximity and physical contact. How will hands-on therapy recover from this? Perhaps the lessons of history could have been useful to our thinking, maybe not, but without adequate records, and people skilled in analyzing this kind of data, we will never know.

Which brings us to a related issue; there is little physiotherapy history taught in curricula, and very few opportunities exist for students to study their professional history. Those who have analyzed the history of the profession in theses have primarily done so in history, comparative literature, sociology, and philosophy departments, where their support comes from academics with little knowledge of healthcare practice. All of the authors bar one in this issue are physiotherapists with an interest in history. It is rare for historians to be interested in physiotherapy. Again, this is not the same for our sister professions of medicine and nursing, where it seems students clamor to study their professions histories, and see it as an intrinsic part of being a doctor or a nurse. Many practitioners are proud of their heritage and their profession's achievements. But they only come to this knowledge through histories of their forebears, and the passions of present-day

academics, clinicians and researchers who keep their profession's accounts alive.

Physiotherapists are, perhaps, too modest about their work. We have been trained to be in service of others (i.e. medicine, the state, and individual patients), and we are trained to focus on the body in front of us. The historical and social aspects of practice appear, at least empirically, not to interest us that much. We use and adapt age-old modalities to age-old health problems, and there is no attempt to find the next significant breakthrough, like antibiotics or genetic therapy, that will transport the profession into the future. Perhaps we believe that because we have always been able to adapt our trusted approaches to whatever has been needed in the past, this approach will sustain us into the future. Whether this logic applies when we have digital media that have opened up the knowledge once held by elite professions like medicine, remains to be seen. We are only just beginning to see the real effect of half-a-century of neoliberal economic reforms on the shape of healthcare services, and we are facing a global cataclysm in climate change that may exceed anything practitioners have had to adapt to in previous decades.

So what value does professional history offer here? The history of nursing, medicine, psychology, and dentistry particularly, has shown us that history can be a valuable and powerful tool of professional reform. As the healthcare system goes through another period of dramatic transformation as a result of a global pandemic, it is timely to think how physiotherapy might look back to its recent past to anticipate how it might need to transform soon. Physiotherapy is facing several significant challenges, and some of the works presented in this special issue remind us that the ways physiotherapists have traditionally viewed healthcare, bodies, function and movement, therapy and rehabilitation, and its relationships with various 'others', are contingent on the socio-political and historical conditions that physiotherapists have paid little scholarly attention to in the past.

In the opening paper, Sandra Schiller provides a socio-historical critique of the development of physiotherapy in Germany. In the article, she focuses on the role that gender and class played in shaping modern physiotherapy. From the early reception of Swedish gymnastics, its relationship with medicine, and the work of its women pioneers, Schiller draws the link between the social and historical conditions that made physiotherapy possible and the space that the profession came to occupy in Germany.

A similar theme runs through the paper on neurasthenia and the early history of physiotherapy in the UK that I have written for this issue. Here, I echo

Schiller's argument that physiotherapy needs to be understood as a specific historical agent, rather than merely as an extension of, or handmaiden to, medicine. Focusing, as well, on the questions of gender, I argue that these early women physiotherapists created a 'third space' between the angelic female nurse and the patriarchal doctor, exemplified in the Rest Cure – the treatment that we can see now as a testing ground for physiotherapy's professional gender relations.

In Ann Liebert's paper, we shift from the treatment of a specific condition to the way a set of light-based modalities shaped physiotherapy practice. Drawing on the pioneering work of Niels Finsen, Liebert argues that developments in phototherapies interweave the history of the profession, and connect physiotherapy to many of the public health crises (i.e. TB, smallpox, psoriasis, neonatal jaundice, and latterly chronic pain) that have been significant influences on healthcare. Liebert sets out how these approaches have shaped modern practice and the innovations that have made modern physiotherapy possible.

In his paper, Robert Jones provides a narrative history of blind physiotherapy and its contribution to the profession in the United Kingdom. Marking the centenary of the Association of Blind Certificated Masseurs becoming the first special interest group of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in the UK, Jones charts the important role visually impaired therapists have played in shaping the physiotherapy profession. The changing nature of healthcare practice, and the declining numbers of blind students entering the profession, though, force Jones to ask what role visually impaired people will play in growing physiotherapy in the future.

In Tone Dahl-Michelsen, Dave Nicholls, Jan Messel, and Karen Synne-Groven's paper, we have the first of two studies of Norwegian physical therapy pioneers. Bess Mensendieck's movement system represents one of the only radical departures from the uniform physiotherapy curriculum offered in most countries around the world. The approach makes a virtue of the relational aspects of movement, and a 'holistic' understanding of the body in space, but its role is endangered by assimilation into more uniform physiotherapy curricula. In this paper, the authors consider the long history of contest, compromise and co-operation between Mensendieck's approach and the emerging physiotherapy programme in Norway.

Ann Langaas and Anne-Lise Middelthon's paper examines another Norwegian pioneer, the 19th-century orthopedist Gunder Nielsen Kjølstad. In the article, the authors argue that Kjølstad's approach to body

awareness and movement paved the way for a controversial, diverse and eclectic approach to the management of back problems. The authors argue that Kjølstad was instrumental in shaping how Norwegian doctors and physiotherapists approach back problems today. Still, as with Mensendieck, we should also consider the style of their thinking and practice as being just as important as their treatment methods.

In our final paper, Alexandra Giraldo-Pedroza, Aydee Luisa Robayo-Torres, Alma Viviana Silva Guerrero, and I describe the first narrative history of physiotherapy in three Latin American countries: Argentina; Colombia; and Ecuador. Drawn from first-hand accounts of therapists who have lived through the influences of European colonization, political and military upheaval, and the challenges of developing economies, we explore how physiotherapy has developed in education, theory, and practice. Returning to many of the discourses evident in earlier papers, we too find gender, the profession's relationship to medicine, the development of therapeutic techniques, and physiotherapy's response to shifting social pressures vibrant influences on the profession. We also find leaders who are prepared to drive physiotherapy forward, even during the most challenging times.

What these papers show is that physiotherapy has a vibrant past, and although the study of that past remains in its infancy, we have both a vast field of interest available to us, and generations of experience in doing healthcare history to draw on. Most importantly, we see history as a tool to help us understand the present, and prepare for a future in which perhaps the only thing we can be sure of is that it will produce more material for historians to sink their teeth into.

Note

1. At the time of writing, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, *The Guardian* newspaper published its list of the *Top 10 books about nursing* (<http://tinyurl.com/y9gfaeze>). I suspect most physiotherapists would be hard pressed to name three contemporary works of fiction that even *included* physiotherapy in them, never mind featuring as the main subject of the book.

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