

Physical activity prescription for chronic disease: effects of a 6-month intervention led by physical educators

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Background and purpose

Physical activity (PA) prescription has the potential to be an important therapeutic agent for all ages in primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of chronic disease (Thornton et al., 2016). However, physicians report that they do not deliver PA counselling because of limitations in time, knowledge, confidence, and practical tools (Meriwether, Lee, Lafleur & Wiseman, 2008). Physical educators have the required skills to address those issues in encouraging patients to adopt an active lifestyle that will reduce the incidence of their chronic conditions.

Methods

With a PA prescription from their doctor, patients with chronic disease took part to a 6-month intervention supervised by physical educators in a municipality of the Liege's area (Belgium). The program was composed of weekly sessions of physical exercise focusing on the 4 dimensions of physical fitness according to international recommendations (ACSM, 2016). Monthly motivational sessions were organized to promote active lifestyle. Monthly assessments included PA level (Ricci & Gagnon, 2011), SF-36 (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992), and Senior Fitness Test (Rikli & Jones, 2001). Representations and motivations of the coaches and participants were interrogated before and after the intervention.

Results

Preliminary results after 1-month intervention on 19 patients (68.6 ± 10.8 years) with chronic cardiac ($n=11$), neurological ($n=2$), metabolic ($n=1$), oncological ($n=4$) or spinal ($n=1$) diseases exposed significant improvements of their lower ($p=.03$) and upper ($p=.01$) body strength, and aerobic endurance ($p=.02$). No significant changes were observed for PA level and SF-36 scores. Further results will provide information about the impact of motivational sessions on the adoption of an active lifestyle.

Conclusions

PA prescription supervised by physical educators has the potential to bridge the missing link between hospital revalidation performed by physiotherapists and autonomous physical activity. If outcomes are favorable, it could provide an advocacy to inspire key decision makers and policies to ameliorate chronic diseases care highlighting the contribution of physical educators.