

# Enhancing Quality of Life Through Physiotherapy in Palliative Care: A Systematic Review of Evidence, Implementation Barriers, and Future Perspectives

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**How to cite this article:** Neha Sahni, Pooja Sharma. Enhancing Quality of Life Through Physiotherapy in Palliative Care: A Systematic Review of Evidence, Implementation Barriers, and Future Perspectives. Indian Journal of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy / Vol 20 No. 1, January - March 2026

## Abstract

**Background:** Palliative care aims to enhance the quality of life (QoL) for patients with life-limiting illnesses. Physiotherapy is a key component, but its full scope and impact require synthesis. This systematic review critically evaluates current evidence on physiotherapy's role and effectiveness in palliative care, focusing on improving patient QoL.

**Methodology:** The data was collected analyzing the research studies published between 2010 and 2025 from databases like Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus using appropriate keywords. The review covers physiotherapy interventions (exercise, manual therapy, symptom management, education) for diverse patient groups (cancer, neurological, cardiopulmonary, HIV, frailty) across various palliative care settings.

**Results:** Consistent evidence shows that physiotherapy improves physical function, manages symptoms (pain, fatigue, dyspnea), enhances psychological well-being, and supports independence; the positive impact of interventions on QoL of patients; the significant barriers to integration, including lack of awareness, underutilization, training gaps, and resource limitations; and the need for more robust research and holistic outcome measures.

**Conclusion:** Physiotherapy is essential for enhancing the quality of life for patients in palliative care; however, addressing barriers through education, collaboration, resource advocacy, and research is crucial to optimize its benefits for patients and families.

**Keywords:** Physiotherapy; Physical Therapy; Rehabilitation; P.T.; Palliative care

## Introduction & Background

Palliative care represents a vital and expanding field within healthcare, fundamentally focused on enhancing the quality of life (QoL) for individuals and their families confronting life-limiting

illnesses. Central to its philosophy is a holistic, multidisciplinary approach aimed at preventing and alleviating suffering through meticulous assessment and management of physical, psychosocial, and spiritual challenges (World Health Organization). As global demographics shift towards aging

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**Submission:** Jun 6, 2025

**Revision:** August 5, 2025

**Published date:** January 7, 2026

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populations and the prevalence of chronic, non-communicable diseases increase, the demand for accessible and comprehensive palliative care services is intensifying worldwide. Within this essential framework, the contributions of allied health professions, notably physiotherapy, are increasingly recognized as integral components of effective care.

Physiotherapy, often traditionally linked with rehabilitation following acute events, offers a distinct and valuable skill set when applied within the palliative care context. Here, the focus transcends curative ambitions, shifting towards optimizing functional capacity, maximizing patient independence, managing burdensome symptoms, and promoting overall well-being throughout the illness trajectory, including the end-of-life phase. The professional development of physiotherapy within palliative care reflects broader healthcare trends toward interdisciplinary collaboration and holistic patient management.

Contemporary palliative physiotherapy practice encompasses diverse therapeutic modalities including exercise interventions, manual therapy techniques, respiratory management, pain control strategies, and functional rehabilitation approaches<sup>16</sup>. Research has consistently demonstrated physiotherapy's effectiveness in managing primary symptoms, including pain, dyspnea, fatigue, and functional decline often associated with serious illness, while simultaneously addressing psychological distress and enhancing patient autonomy<sup>20</sup>. This comprehensive scope of practice reflects the profession's evolution toward addressing not only physical symptoms but also contributing to quality of life improvements and psychosocial well-being for patients with life-limiting conditions<sup>12</sup>. These outcomes have established physiotherapy as an essential component of comprehensive palliative care delivery, contributing to reduced healthcare costs, decreased hospital stay lengths, and improved patient satisfaction<sup>2</sup>.

Recent healthcare challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have further demonstrated

the adaptability and essential nature of palliative physiotherapy services. Practitioners have successfully adapted clinical practices to ensure patient safety while maintaining high care standards through innovative service delivery models, including expanded telerehabilitation services and modified treatment protocols<sup>7</sup>. These adaptations reflect the profession's commitment to maintaining comprehensive care delivery even under challenging circumstances, reinforcing physiotherapy's integral role in palliative care provision.

Despite these demonstrated benefits and the strong rationale for its inclusion, the potential of physiotherapy within palliative care settings remains significantly underutilized globally. This Gap stems from several interconnected factors; a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the physiotherapist's specific role among other healthcare professionals, patients, and the general public; insufficient specialized training and educational opportunities for physiotherapists in the principles and practice of palliative care; systemic resource limitations, particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries and community-based care settings; and inherent challenges in defining and measuring holistic outcomes that extend beyond purely physical metrics. Addressing these multifaceted barriers is essential to ensure equitable access to high-quality palliative care that fully incorporates the vital contributions of physiotherapy.

This systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the current state of knowledge regarding the role, effectiveness, and scope of physiotherapy in palliative care. It explores the multifaceted contributions of physiotherapy across diverse palliative patient populations and various care settings (including hospice, hospital, and community environments). Subsequently, the review will delve into the evidence supporting the efficacy of specific physiotherapy interventions in managing key symptoms such as pain, fatigue,

and dyspnea and in improving patient-reported outcomes, particularly QoL and functional independence. The paper will critically examine the significant implementation barriers and facilitators that influence the integration of physiotherapy services, encompassing professional, educational, systemic, and resource-related factors. Finally, the review will discuss future perspectives, highlighting critical areas for further research, outlining needs for enhanced education and training pathways, and proposing strategies for policy development and clinical practice improvement to optimize the role of physiotherapy in enhancing QoL for individuals receiving palliative care.

## Methodology

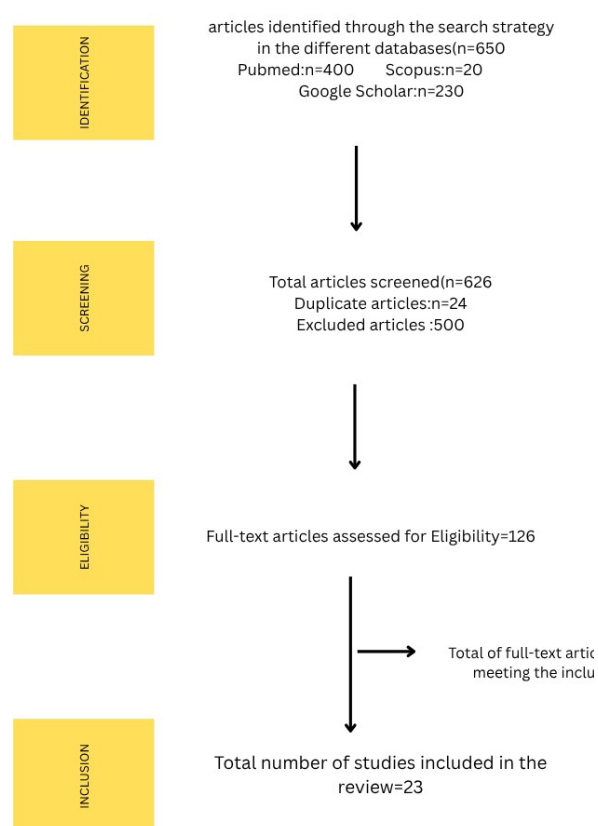
This study delved into enhancing Quality of Life through Physiotherapy in Palliative Care, using a systematic review of the literature following the PRISMA guidelines and analyzing the research studies published between 2010 and 2025 from databases like Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus. A combination of keywords and subject headings related to physiotherapy and palliative care was used. The core concepts searched included physiotherapy interventions, palliative care context, pain management, and symptom relief, Quality of Life, mobility, or independence. Searches were adapted for the syntax requirements of each database (Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus).

**Search Strategy:** Physiotherapy” OR “Physical Therapy” OR “Rehabilitation” OR “Exercise Therapy” OR “Intervention” OR “Palliative Care”.

**Google Scholar:** Physical therapy and Palliative care

**PubMed:** (((((Physiotherapy) OR (Physical therapy)) OR (Rehabilitation)) ) OR (P.T.)) AND (Palliative care)

**Scopus:** Physical AND therapy AND palliative AND care AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “MEDI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “NURS”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “HEAL”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “MULT”)) AND LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))



**Flowchart of the article selection process**

## Inclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing on physiotherapy, physical therapy, or rehabilitation interventions within a recognized palliative care context or for patients with clearly defined palliative needs.
- Studies involving adult or pediatric populations diagnosed with life-limiting illnesses (e.g., advanced cancer, progressive neurological disorders-Multiple Sclerosis, Stroke, end-stage cardiopulmonary disease, Constipation, HIV/AIDS, severe frailty).
- Articles examining the role, scope, effectiveness, specific interventions, implementation challenges, educational aspects, or patient/provider perspectives related to physiotherapy in palliative care.
- Studies reporting on outcomes relevant to palliative care, such as quality of life, symptom control (pain, fatigue, dyspnea, etc.), functional

status, mobility, independence, patient satisfaction, or caregiver burden.

- Original research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), randomized control trials, practice guidelines, and descriptive studies.
- Articles published in the English language.

### Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing exclusively on rehabilitation in non-palliative contexts (e.g., acute post-operative recovery, sports injuries) without reference to life-limiting illness or palliative goals.
- Studies where physiotherapy was not a primary intervention or focus of investigation.
- Articles not available in English.
- Editorials, letters to the editor, conference abstracts, or commentaries lacking substantial original data or synthesis.
- Studies focusing solely on pharmacological or surgical interventions for symptom management without a physiotherapy component.

The methodological quality of included studies was evaluated using appropriate tools—Randomized controlled trials were assessed with the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool 23. Other study designs were evaluated for risk of bias and methodological rigor as appropriate. The literature consistently portrays physiotherapy in palliative care as extending far beyond mere physical symptom management. The role is dynamic, adapting from a rehabilitative focus in earlier stages to supportive care as the disease progresses, often employing multiple models concurrently<sup>15</sup>. PTs act as “specialist generalists,” addressing holistic needs beyond specific symptoms<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, the palliative approach, including physiotherapy, is advocated not just at the end stage but much earlier in the disease trajectory<sup>12</sup>. This systematic review synthesizes current evidence regarding the role, effectiveness, implementation strategies, and evolving practices of physiotherapy interventions within palliative care settings,

encompassing both adult and pediatric populations across diverse diagnostic categories.

### Analysis & Interpretation

The research data highlights a few key themes:

**Core Transformation:** The literature documents a fundamental shift in physiotherapy practice from cure-focused rehabilitation to comfort-oriented, quality-of-life enhancement approaches that honour patient dignity while addressing complex physical and psychosocial needs.

**Multi-Dimensional Impact:** The evidence shows that physiotherapy interventions create cascading positive effects across multiple symptom domains simultaneously, suggesting these treatments influence neurochemical, psychological, and social pathways more profoundly than traditional rehabilitation approaches.

**Sophisticated Clinical Reasoning:** The research demonstrates that effective palliative physiotherapy requires advanced clinical decision-making that balances therapeutic benefit with patient tolerance, prognosis, and individual preferences - challenging assumptions about treatment limitations in advanced illness.

**Expanded Professional Roles:** The literature reveals that physiotherapists in palliative care settings have evolved beyond traditional physical interventions to include family education, equipment management, psycho-social support, and collaborative care coordination.

**Evidence-Based Innovation:** The research documents measurable benefits, including reduced healthcare costs, shorter hospital stays, improved functional independence, and enhanced quality of life, while also revealing the need for specialized outcome measures that capture comfort and dignity alongside traditional physical metrics.

**Professional Transformation:** The literature documents a significant expansion of physiotherapist roles beyond traditional boundaries, requiring specialized training and raising important questions about competency requirements and scope of practice.

This interpretation highlights how the evidence base supports physiotherapy as an essential, sophisticated component of comprehensive palliative care that addresses the full spectrum of human needs during life-limiting illness.

**Implementation Considerations:** The analysis reveals that successful physiotherapy integration depends on multidisciplinary collaboration, flexible service delivery models, and adaptation to local healthcare system characteristics.

**Table No. 1: Physiotherapy in Palliative Care (Literature Review Summary)**

Author	Year	Findings	Methodology
Aljohi	2025	Review of isometric spinal stabilization exercises showed positive impacts across multiple outcomes: pain reduction, quality of life improvement, enhanced physical functioning, decreased physical fatigue, and improved bone health.	A Systematic Review -8 studies included 116 adults with spine metastasis. The supervised exercise interventions, conducted by a physical therapist or exercise physiologist, included isometric spinal stabilization exercises supervised for approximately 2 weeks and continued as home exercises ranging from 12 to 24 weeks.
Pennycooke	2024	Nearly half of patients showed improvement in the palliative care phase, and over half were discharged home or to residential care rather than dying in hospital. Interventions helped patients achieve goals of maintaining independence and quality of life.	A prospective clinical audit was undertaken in a metropolitan palliative care service of all inpatient and community palliative care patients referred for physiotherapy review and intervention, over 4 weeks.
Navarro-Meléndez et al.	2023	Quantitative evidence of functional improvements through physiotherapy: decreased patients with total dependence (Barthel Index) and reduced non-functional ambulators (Functional Ambulation Categories). Physiotherapy inclusion contributed to better functionality, increased independence, and improved ADL skills.	An observational, prospective, descriptive, practice-based study was undertaken involving patients admitted to the PCU of Spain. Participants were assessed prior to initiating and at the end of the physiotherapy program. A descriptive analysis was performed, and scale scores before and after treatment were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.
Raznatovska	2023	Physical therapists play vital roles in pulmonary rehabilitation within palliative care teams. Focus on improving physical functioning essential for patients with chronic respiratory disorders, addressing complex respiratory challenges in terminal illness management.	The primary method employed in this paper is a comprehensive review of existing literature. Various studies and references related to pulmonary rehabilitation in patients with chronic respiratory diseases who are in palliative and hospice care have been analysed. This approach allowed them to gather a wide range of data on the characteristics and frequency of pulmonary rehabilitation usage in this specific patient population.

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Polastri& Cuomo	2022	Reinforced physiotherapy's crucial role in comprehensive palliative care, effective in managing dyspnea, improving physical function, and providing emotional support to patients and families. Integration of respiratory management with emotional support exemplified a holistic approach.	An editorial It discusses the importance of evidence-based practice, multidisciplinary collaboration, and patient-centered care in the context of palliative physiotherapy for end-stage respiratory diseases.
Drouin	2020	During COVID-19, physiotherapists globally adapted clinical practices to ensure patient safety while maintaining high care standards. Utilized standards of practice, critical thinking, and patient preferences to prioritize treatments and develop expanded telerehabilitation services.	Responses were solicited from PTs serving as Member Organization Liaisons to the IPT- HOPE Subgroup. Other PTs contributed responses during the virtual session and through e-mails after watching the recording of the session. Twenty-five PTs from 16 countries shared their clinical decisions and experiences in this public forum.
Montagnini	2020	Comprehensive goals of palliative physiotherapy: maximizing functional ability, managing symptoms, educating patients and caregivers, and improving overall quality of life for patients with life-limiting illnesses. Reflected evolution toward comprehensive, holistic care delivery models.	A perspective paper. It synthesizes findings from various studies to discuss the role, assessment, and specific interventions of rehabilitation in hospice and palliative care settings.
Leysen& Van Daele	2019	Physiotherapy's significant role in minimizing symptom impacts while sustaining or improving quality of life and ADLs. Addressed variety of symptoms including pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and reduced physical functioning, demonstrating comprehensive scope of intervention.	An exploratory web-based survey. Between September 2017 and May 2018. Ninety-one therapists who treated palliative patients within the last year used a variety of different interventions. This study investigated the OP and PT interventions used in palliative care in Belgium. a total of 91 respondents were included.
McLeod	2019	Physiotherapists' roles included addressing physical aspects (mobility, function, pain, comfort management), managing equipment, teaching patients and families techniques, and contributing to quality of life and psychosocial/emotional needs. Practice demonstrated patient-centred and goal-driven approaches.	Qualitative research utilizing inductive thematic analysis. The data was collected through semi structured telephone interviews and emailed submissions from physiotherapists and (n=14)one physiotherapy student with current or recent palliative care experience in Ontario, Canada. The researchers then performed a secondary qualitative analysis of these interview records and email submissions.

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Tidmarsh & Bradfield	2019	Pilot study of rehabilitative palliative care physiotherapy and gym programs showed measurable improvements in patients' mental health even when physical improvements weren't evident. Highlighted importance of psychological outcome measures alongside physical assessments.	Existing and new patients to the gym have completed an IPOS and have been asked to complete the PHQ-9 (Depression) and GAD-7 (Anxiety) questionnaires. Patients are then reviewed approximately every 12 weeks. Results of the review and questionnaires are collated and used to identify not only further physiotherapy intervention but whether the patient would benefit from other parts of the rehabilitation and wellbeing service.
Baldwin	2018	Comprehensive review evidence supporting physiotherapy's crucial role in palliative care: better symptom management, reduced healthcare costs, decreased hospital stays, lower readmission rates, enhanced satisfaction, and improved quality of life. Established physiotherapy as essential component of comprehensive palliative care delivery.	Peer-reviewed articles regarding PT within PC as it relates to public policy and health care reform were retrieved that described a variety of aspects of the effect of public policy and health care reform on the integration of PT and PC.
Olsson Möller	2018	Person-centred palliative care integrated into daily physiotherapy activities. Treatments were varied, complex, and interconnected, leading to meaningful interventions. Physiotherapy activities aimed to bridge gaps between what patients wanted to do and their physical abilities.	Using a free-listing approach, ten physiotherapists working in eight specialized palliative care settings in Sweden were included (directly or indirectly) during 10 days. The statements were analysed using qualitative content analysis.
Wittry	2018	Physical therapy contributed to better symptom management, reduced healthcare costs, decreased hospital stay lengths, lower readmission rates, enhanced patient and provider satisfaction, and improved quality of life. Literature review supported effectiveness of various rehabilitation interventions including exercise programs.	A literature review of cancer rehabilitation topics and techniques specifically applied to patients with life-limiting conditions. Exercise and other rehabilitation interventions were analyzed for their effects on common symptoms and disabilities experienced by this patient population.
Belchamber	2017	Described how physiotherapy established itself as indispensable component of palliative cancer care. Practitioners evolved to meet complex, multifaceted needs of vulnerable populations, reflecting professional metamorphosis toward patient-centered, compassionate care addressing physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.	A single qualitative case study design. Multiple methods of data collection, which included four data sets: interviews (healthcare professionals [10]); interviews (service users [10]); observations (physiotherapists [2] treating service users [5]); and policy document collection (NICE guidelines; white papers [12]). A thematic approach to data analysis was used within and across the four datasets.

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Trylińska-Tekielska &Gidziński	2017	Patients' expectations differed significantly before and after physiotherapy treatment, revealing transformative impact on patient perspectives, understanding, and overall well-being. Physiotherapy interventions addressed physical symptoms and fundamentally altered patient perceptions and coping strategies.	Studied group consisted of 22 patients, aged 30-80 years, in advanced stage of cancer disease. The patients' expectations were recorded on Questionnaire of Expectations Patient-Physiotherapist (QEPP). The patients' expectations were based on Questionnaire of Expectations Patient-Physiotherapist (QEPP).
Kaur	2016	Multiple sclerosis case study showing effectiveness of early palliative care integration with physiotherapy. Positive outcomes from aerobic training (static cycling, treadmill walking), balance retraining with Tai-chi principles, pelvic floor strengthening, and cognitive rehabilitation including motor imagery techniques.	This is a case report.
Minosso	2016	Rehabilitation played significant roles in helping patients achieve daily activities and structure their lives, leading to improved quality of life. Established functional rehabilitation as viable strategy to combat functional decline and enhance quality of life for palliative care patients.	An integrative review was undertaken. The guiding question was: what are the results of functional rehabilitation in adult palliative care patients? To answer the question, the PICO- Population, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome strategy was used.
Pyszora	2016	Specific, short-term physiotherapy programs significantly reduced cancer-related fatigue in advanced cancer patients receiving palliative care. Measurable improvements in general well-being and reductions in coexisting symptoms including pain, drowsiness, appetite loss, and depression as measured by ESAS. Multi-symptom approach characteristic of palliative physiotherapy practice.	A randomized controlled trial. Sixty patients diagnosed with advanced cancer receiving palliative care were randomized into two groups: the treatment group (n = 30) and the control group (n = 30). The therapy took place three times a week for 2 weeks. The 30-min physiotherapy session included active exercises, myofascial release, and proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF) techniques.
Barawid& Covarrubias	2015	Rehabilitation services significantly improved the quality of life for patients with life-threatening illnesses by addressing functional decline, mobility limitations, pain management, and psychological well-being. Benefits included enhanced psychological well-being, increased independence, and reduced caregiver burden across various conditions.	A narrative review article. It synthesizes existing research and clinical experience to discuss the benefits of rehabilitation interventions for patients with late-stage illnesses.

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Pyszora, Jagielski, & Jagielska	2015	Case study evidence demonstrating successful treatment of specific pain syndromes in advanced cancer patients, particularly myofascial pain syndrome. Established physiotherapy as viable, evidence-based treatment for complex pain presentations.	This is a case-study.
Campbell et al.	2014	Comprehensive programs combining psycho-education, exercise, and relaxation techniques led to improvements in patient confidence and overall quality of life, plus enhanced strategies for managing condition exacerbations.	A commentary. It synthesizes existing information and research to support its arguments and provide rationale for integrating rehabilitation services into palliative care.
Clemens & Jaspers	2010	Majority of palliative care patients with lymphedema experienced clinical improvements in symptom intensity (pain and dyspnea) immediately following manual lymphatic drainage interventions. Established adjuvant physiotherapeutic manual lymphatic drainage as valuable for pain and symptom management.	Retrospective study (reflexive control design) of data of the 208 patients admitted to our palliative care unit from January 2007 to December 2007. Demographic and disease-related data (diagnosis, symptoms, Karnofsky performance status and effect of manual lymphatic drainage interventions) were documented and compared. Statistics: mean + SD, median; Wilcoxon's test.
Pyszora & Krajnik	2010	Highlighted physiotherapy's role in treating constipation for advanced cancer patients through abdominal massage, myofascial release techniques, and therapeutic exercises supplementing prescribed laxative medications. Demonstrated integration of manual therapy with conventional medical management.	This is a case-report.

## Discussion

### Symptom-Specific Interventions and Clinical Effectiveness

The evidence robustly demonstrates that physiotherapy interventions in palliative care are highly effective, often targeting multiple symptom clusters simultaneously and challenging the assumption that patients with advanced cancer cannot benefit from rehabilitative strategies.<sup>1,23</sup>

Further case studies highlight the successful treatment of specific conditions such as myofascial

pain syndrome and constipation through targeted physiotherapy techniques, underscoring the broad applicability of these interventions.<sup>23,24</sup>

### Exercise-Based Interventions and Functional Outcomes

Structured exercise is a cornerstone of palliative physiotherapy, with significant evidence supporting its safety and effectiveness. The research demonstrates the multifaceted nature of exercise prescription in palliative care, which also yields measurable improvements in psychological stress.<sup>1</sup>

## Specialized Manual Therapy Techniques

The literature provides significant evidence for the use of specialized manual therapy in palliative care.<sup>6,24</sup>

## Patient-Centered Care and Expectation Management

A crucial aspect of palliative physiotherapy is its patient-centered approach, which can transform patient perspectives.<sup>15,28</sup>

## Functional Independence and Activities of Daily Living

A substantial body of evidence confirms physiotherapy's vital role in maintaining and improving functional independence for patients in palliative care.<sup>14,17</sup>

## Respiratory and Cardiopulmonary Management

Physiotherapy is essential in managing the respiratory complications common in palliative populations.<sup>20,25</sup>

## Multidisciplinary Integration and Collaborative Care

Contemporary palliative physiotherapy operates within a sophisticated multidisciplinary framework.<sup>12</sup>

## Outcome Measurement and Quality of Life

Quantifying the effectiveness of physiotherapy in palliative care presents both challenges and successes.<sup>27</sup>

## Service Delivery Models and Innovation

The field is characterized by evolving service delivery models that enhance accessibility and effectiveness. The integration of person-centered care into daily physiotherapy activities leads to varied, complex, and interconnected treatments that are meaningful for patients.<sup>(8)</sup>

## Functional Rehabilitation and Quality of Life Enhancement

Ultimately, the goal of physiotherapy in palliative care is to enhance the quality of life. By helping patients achieve daily activities and structure their lives, rehabilitation significantly improves their overall well-being. The evidence consistently shows that by addressing functional decline, managing symptoms, and providing psychological support, physiotherapy enables patients to live more fully despite their life-limiting illnesses.<sup>(14)</sup>

## Conclusion

Physiotherapy plays a vital and multifaceted role in palliative care, significantly enhancing the quality of life for patients with advanced illnesses. Despite these benefits, physiotherapy remains underutilized in many community and home-based palliative care settings, with access often influenced by socioeconomic and clinical factors. Patients frequently report unmet needs related to physical activity, daily functioning, and symptom management, which could be alleviated through greater integration of physiotherapists into palliative care teams. The evidence also underscores the importance of person-centered, individualized care plans and the need for improved communication and training among physiotherapists to optimize their impact in palliative contexts. While physiotherapy is a safe and effective component of palliative care, further rigorous research and broader implementation are needed to ensure that all patients can benefit from its full potential.

**Conflict of Interest:** Nil

**Source of Funding:** Self

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