

ASCIP INTERDISCIPLINARY CHAMPION ESSAY

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As an early-career spinal cord injury (SCI) professional, I reassure each patient that the life they enjoyed before their injury remains within reach, albeit in a different form. This belief underscores the celebration of their 'life day,' marking the beginning of a new life filled with meaning and purpose. Our responsibility as SCI professionals is to empower individuals to pursue their unique paths. Just as injuries and medical presentations vary, so do their evolving goals and desires, necessitating individualized care plans. Whether aiming to become a Paralympian, walk their daughter down the aisle, or gain independence in daily activities, achieving these goals requires a collaborative team with diverse expertise, ensuring each patient is equipped for a promising future and has access to sustainable community resources.

Efficient and optimal interdisciplinary care begins with a clear standard of care. SCI patients have diverse needs, and a standard of care delineates each profession's responsibilities, ensuring no critical aspect is overlooked. For example, if physical therapy assumes occupational therapy is handling wheelchair recommendations but it is not, the patient may face delays in receiving a custom wheelchair, leading to poor body mechanics, musculoskeletal injuries, or pressure wounds. A clear standard of care ensures consistency in managing the many components of SCI, including motor function, bowel and bladder management, skin integrity, breath support, swallowing, assistive technology, medication, community resources, mental health services, and cardiovascular health.

While a standard of care is essential, interdisciplinary communication remains crucial. Consistent communication ensures each profession implements its specific standard of care, addressing every aspect of the patient's needs. Interdisciplinary meetings immediately following evaluations can determine factors like length of stay, plan of care, barriers, and patient-centered goals, as well as the role each discipline will play. Encouraging open dialogue and the exchange of ideas helps identify potential challenges and create solutions that leverage the unique skills of each team member to address the patient's current medical presentation and goals.

With evolving technology and communication methods such as secure EMR chat systems, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, it is imperative to utilize these tools to collaborate effectively, ensuring optimal patient care. Whether messaging a physician to place an X-ray order after a fall, a registered nurse providing an update on mobility status, or an occupational therapist reaching out to social work, it is easier than ever to contact fellow providers and ensure patients have the resources they need. Furthermore, these technologies empower patients by facilitating access to their healthcare information and communication with their care team, promoting active engagement in care decisions, improved treatment plan adherence, and potentially better health outcomes.

Effective communication is essential for optimal patient care and ensuring healthcare accessibility. As a recent rehabilitation graduate, I have observed varied outpatient scheduling processes across three clinics. A well-designed system should prioritize accessibility, recognizing that patients have multifaceted lives beyond their healthcare needs. Supporting their lives outside the clinic begins with effective scheduling. Clinician-performed batch scheduling has proven most effective, streamlining operations, accommodating patient preferences, reducing provider gaps, and optimizing resources. This approach enables patients to maintain their lives outside the clinic while simultaneously improving attendance in a fiscally conservative manner for healthcare systems.

As SCI professionals, we must remain committed to removing barriers and improving accessibility not just to licensed rehabilitation and medical services but also to community reintegration after rehabilitation. Community reintegration, a key indicator of successful

rehabilitation, is facilitated by social support and access to recreational activities.^{1,2,3} However, only 35% of individuals with SCI engage in sufficient physical activity, and social isolation has worsened since the pandemic.^{4,5} The most common barriers to recreational exercise for individuals with disabilities include lack of personal assistance, membership costs, and gym accessibility.⁶

During my second year of my Doctor of Physical Therapy schooling, I addressed these barriers through a community service project called Adaptive Endeavors. This pro-bono wellness program provides personalized fitness regimens, education, recreational activities, and adaptive sports for individuals with chronic disabilities. Developed in collaboration with the Columbus Recreation and Parks Therapeutic Recreation Department, the program offers personalized fitness classes with one-on-one volunteer assistance in a fully accessible gym equipped with adaptive equipment designed for wheelchair users. Educational sessions feature speakers from pro-bono mental health services and cover topics like assistive technology. Participants are also exposed to adaptive sports and recreation such as mountain biking, archery, and wheelchair rugby. The program aims to provide physical activity and show participants the opportunities available in life after their 'life day,' fostering a sense of community among like-minded individuals.

Most importantly, the program is effective and sustainable. It has served over 25 individuals with neurologic disabilities, primarily those with SCI. Participants who attend 80% of fitness sessions have shown significant improvements in physical outcomes. Testimonials highlight that the program has empowered them with the confidence to seek community opportunities they previously lacked. The program is entirely volunteer run by undergraduate and graduate students pursuing healthcare careers. Each year, an executive board election ensures leadership transitions to new students, guided by rehabilitation professionals and the Recreation and Parks Therapeutic Recreation division.

This is a call to action for all SCI professionals. We must commit to a standard of practice that ensures consistent, optimal care through tenacious collaboration. By engaging in interprofessional decision-making and staying updated with the latest technology, we can guarantee continuity of care. Remember that our patients are already leading meaningful lives; consider this when scheduling their medical appointments. Lastly, let's continue to remove barriers and bridge the gap between rehabilitation and community integration by collaborating with community resources to ensure sustainable accessibility for individuals living with SCI at all stages of their journey following their 'life day.'

References

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