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POLICY BRIEF

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IMPROVING REHABILITATION SERVICES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: QUALITATIVE EXPERIENCES OF PERSONS WITH AMPUTATIONS AND THEIR RELATIVES

Summary

Amputation rates have been rising in Trinidad and Tobago. This means there will be increasing demand for rehabilitation services as these enhance independence, optimise the abilities of persons with amputations and improve overall wellbeing. Within Trinidad and Tobago research indicates a shortage of physiotherapists and occupational therapists and long wait times for services, which can hinder the rehabilitation process. Additionally, the demand for mental health services exceeds the available resources. Leveraging the qualitative experiences of persons with amputations and their relatives could provide further insight into rehabilitation services. Analysis of interviews with seventeen persons with amputations and seventeen relatives of persons with amputations revealed significant gaps in structured rehabilitation services for persons with amputations, namely home-based support, physiotherapy, aqua and occupational therapy and mental health support. Improving services in these areas would ensure a smoother transition to post-amputation life.

Problem Statement

The prevalence of amputations is expected to increase globally. Even in Trinidad and Tobago, despite the implementation of programmes to reduce non-communicable diseases, amputation rates have been rising (Islam et al., 2021). Focused rehabilitation programs, including physical and occupational therapies and prosthetic applications, enhance independence and optimise the abilities of persons with amputations, ultimately improving their overall wellbeing (Alessa et al., 2022; Sarroca et al., 2021). Within Trinidad and Tobago, research indicates that rehabilitation support for persons with amputations is lacking. For example, a shortage of physiotherapists and occupational therapists, along with long wait times for services can hinder the rehabilitation process (Bahall, 2018; Murray-Mendez et al., 2021).

In the context of mental health, Trinidad and Tobago has taken several legislative and policy steps, including the establishment of a Mental Health Act and drafting of a National Mental Health Policy, while allocating 4% of its total health expenditure to mental health (The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration, 2018). Despite these efforts, the demand for mental health services continues to exceed the available resources, with only 1.7 psychiatrists and 0.3 psychologists per 100,000 people (Roopnarine et al., 2022). Insight regarding how people navigate existing rehabilitation services can help identify gaps and inform future intervention. It is therefore necessary to leverage the qualitative experiences of persons with amputations and their relatives.

Research Overview

Interviews with seventeen persons with amputations and seventeen relatives of persons with amputations were analysed (Parey et al., 2025). The persons with amputations had an amputation within the last ten (10) years. Participants were sampled across the five regional health authorities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Findings

Participants described significant gaps in structured rehabilitation services for persons with amputations (Parey et al., 2025). Themes are displayed in Figure 1 and summarised below. Notably, participants reported that, in the absence of adequate support, they were often forced to rely on personal resources, family support, and private healthcare to manage their rehabilitation.



- **Home-Based Rehabilitation Support.** Participants reported receiving no guidance on safe mobility at home such as wheelchair navigation and bed height adjustments. Family members similarly shared that, in the absence of professional guidance, they relied on independent research through platforms like YouTube and social media to learn techniques such as bed-to-wheelchair transfers.
- **Access to Physiotherapy.** Participants stated that physiotherapy sessions were infrequent (e.g., twice per month or every three months). Some individuals with amputations reported being told they had made sufficient progress after just a few sessions, despite feeling they needed continued support. Those who could afford it sought private physiotherapy, while others emphasized that the lack of consistent access hindered their ability to transition to using a prosthesis.
- **Comprehensive Rehabilitation Options.** Participants noted a lack of access to aqua therapy (known to support mobility and recovery) and occupational therapy (which helps individuals with amputations adapt to daily life and regain independence).
- **Integration of Mental Health into Rehabilitation.** Persons with amputations described experiencing significant emotional and psychological challenges, yet reported receiving little to no counselling support. Mental health services, when offered, were often limited to a single conversation with no follow-up. While some were able to pay privately for therapy, others were unable to access any support due to financial or systemic barriers.

Policy Recommendation

To support a smoother transition to post-amputation life for all individuals, regardless of financial status, there appears to be a critical need for more structured rehabilitation services. The Ministry of Health could play a pivotal role in addressing this gap by exploring the development of such services.

Based on participants' experiences as reported in Parey et al. (2025), possible areas for consideration include:

- Implementation of a home-based rehabilitation checklist on discharge
- Increased public physiotherapy services
- Community facilities for aqua and occupational therapy
- Referral system for mental health services for all stages pre- and post-amputation.

Adopting such strategies may contribute to improved recovery outcomes, enhanced quality of life for persons with amputations, and strengthened support for their families throughout the rehabilitation process.

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To discuss any aspect of this work further or to arrange an intervention, please contact:

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