



Ask the Doctor Article
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If you have never heard of a physiatrist, don't feel bad. Some of my family and friends still think I'm a podiatrist, and I have been quoted in the past in this newspaper as a psychiatrist. But, I am in fact a physiatrist, pronounced "fizz-ee-AT-trist". A physiatrist is a physician who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation.

Physiatry began in the 1930's, but it wasn't until after World War II that the field gained full recognition as a specialty. The use of antibiotics and advances in the treatment of traumatic injuries during this time period resulted in thousands of soldiers returning home with various severe disabilities. Many of these veterans would not have survived their injuries ten or twenty years prior.

For example, prior to World War II, a person with a spinal cord injury typically died in less than 12 months. However, since that time the life expectancy of a spinal cord injury person has been significantly prolonged. The passive or defeatist attitude of the medical establishment in the early part of the 1900's was gradually replaced by a more proactive role.

With time the physiatrist emerged as a physician leader of an interdisciplinary team of health care professionals working toward the common goal of restoring a person who suffered physical disabilities to his or her maximal level of function. The team may also include occupational, physical, speech, recreational, and respiratory therapists, nurses, psychologists, social workers and case managers. This team model provides a holistic approach to the care of a person touched by catastrophic injury or illness, addressing not only physical concerns but also psychological, vocational, recreational, social and educational needs.

Physiatrists practice in a variety of settings including primary care hospitals, acute rehab hospitals, sub-acute centers and outpatient clinics to provide continuity of care for the patient from the time of illness or injury to return home. Not only do physiatrists treat patients with traumatic injuries such as brain or spinal cord injuries but also a diversity of neuromuscular problems including amputations, back pain, arthritis and Parkinson's Disease, just to name a few. The role of the physiatrist may be in diagnosing a particular problem such as a pinched nerve in the neck using sophisticated equipment that analyzes the nerve and muscle function. Or, a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist may be consulted to assist in the treatment and restoration of function of a patient with known illness such as a stroke.

As technology improves and the number of survivors of serious illness or injury increases so does the number of persons living with disability. The Institute of Medicine previously estimated that there are 35 million Americans living with a disabling condition, and of those, more than 9 million are unable to work, study, or live independently. To address the needs of this ever-growing and changing population, the role of the physiatrist is constantly changing to improve the quality of life in these individuals.