



“Issues in Rehabilitation”
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Dr. Pechak is an assistant professor in the Physical Therapy Program at the University of Texas at El Paso. Reflecting her passion for global health, her research interests include international service-learning, international clinical education, ethical considerations of global health engagement, and physical therapy’s expanding role in the global health arena. She is vice-chair of the American Physical Therapy Association’s Cross Cultural and International Special Interest Group, and has served in Vietnam, Haiti, and Guatemala for Health Volunteers Overseas.

Given the increases in the number of persons with disabilities and their unmet needs for rehabilitation, physical therapists and other rehabilitation professionals need to expand their roles in the global health arena. The World Health Organization currently estimates that 650 million people live with disabilities around the world, of which 200 million are children. Of those living with disabilities worldwide, 80 percent are estimated to live in low-income countries that lack access to adequate rehabilitation services. The number of persons with disabilities is only expected to grow due to population growth and aging.

Persons with disabilities have often been marginalized in societies, even kept hidden due to shame and social stigma. Similarly, rehabilitation has been overshadowed by more familiar efforts in the global health arena, such as immunization programs. Increasingly, however, persons with disabilities have been advocating for full civil and human rights, including access to medical care and rehabilitation.

Thus the role of rehabilitation in the global health arena is expanding as persons with disabilities and other stakeholders like the World Health Organization and the United Nations are drawing attention to the rights and needs of the growing number of persons with disabilities. Rehabilitation professionals possess unique knowledge and skills to optimize the quality of life for persons with disabilities, through direct rehabilitation services, education, and program development, as well as advocacy for equal rights and social inclusion for all.

Capacity building for rehabilitation services is complex. Variable levels of human, educational, and technological resources and infrastructure are available for training rehabilitation workers and delivering services worldwide. There is not one model of medical rehabilitation and community-based rehabilitation that fits all circumstances. What is appropriate and sustainable in one country may not be so in another.

HVO volunteers endeavor to develop or improve rehabilitation services that are appropriate and sustainable for each country in which they work. Through training and education of rehabilitation technicians in local communities to physical therapy faculty at national universities, volunteers are building rehabilitation capacity in several countries around the world. Volunteers develop and implement individualized training and education programs according to the unique needs of the country and in collaboration with local partners.

In addition, HVO members and returned volunteers have demonstrated leadership in the rehabilitation field in the United States. Members educate their colleagues about global health issues related to rehabilitation, promote increased international professional involvement, and advocate for sustainable and culturally appropriate models of rehabilitation.

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