

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PHYSIOTHERAPIST'S ROLE IN THE CONTEXT OF PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

*CONTRIBUIÇÕES DA ATUAÇÃO DO FISIOTERAPEUTA NA ATENÇÃO PRIMÁRIA
À SAÚDE*

*APORTES DEL ROL DEL FISIOTERAPEUTA EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA ATENCIÓN
PRIMARIA DE SALUD*

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ABSTRACT

Physiotherapy is included in primary health care (PHC) as a way to expand coverage and provide people with comprehensive health care. Thus, the present study aimed to analyze the contributions of physiotherapists in the context of Primary Health Care in the scientific literature. Thus, it is an integrative literature review research with a descriptive and exploratory approach, developed with the findings on a portal and in databases such as: Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro), Virtual Health Library (VHL), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), from 2013 to 2023, using the scientific works that met the eligibility criteria. 9 articles were selected to compose this study, which highlight that the physiotherapist's contributions are directed towards health promotion and disease prevention through activities and actions. With this, it is clear that the physiotherapy professional has a relevant role in PHC, since through his work, like other professionals, he contributes to health promotion and prevention.

Keywords: *Primary Care; Physiotherapist; Health Promotion.*

RESUMO

A fisioterapia está incluída na Atenção Primária à Saúde (APS) como forma de ampliar a cobertura e proporcionar às pessoas assistência integral à saúde. Desse modo, o presente estudo teve como objetivo analisar na literatura científica as contribuições do fisioterapeuta no contexto da Atenção Primária à Saúde. Assim, trata-se de uma pesquisa de revisão integrativa da literatura, com abordagem descritiva e de cunho exploratório, desenvolvida com os achados em portal e nas bases de dados como: Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro), Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS), Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS) e Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), no período de 2013 a 2023, sendo utilizados os trabalhos científicos que respondiam aos critérios de elegibilidade. Foram selecionados para compor esse estudo 9 artigos, salientando que as contribuições do fisioterapeuta estão direcionadas para a promoção da saúde e prevenção de doenças através de atividades e ações. Com isso, percebe-se que o profissional de fisioterapia possui relevante atuação na APS, visto que, por meio da sua atuação, assim como os outros profissionais, contribui para a promoção e prevenção em saúde.


Descritores: *Atenção Primária; Fisioterapeuta; Promoção da Saúde.*

RESUMEN

La fisioterapia se incluye en la atención primaria de salud (APS) como una forma de ampliar la cobertura y brindar a las personas una atención integral en salud. Así, el presente estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las contribuciones de los fisioterapeutas en el contexto de la Atención Primaria de Salud en la literatura científica, por lo que se trata de una investigación de revisión integradora de la literatura, con enfoque descriptivo y exploratorio, desarrollada con los hallazgos en un portal y en bases de datos. tales como: Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro), Biblioteca Virtual en Salud (BVS), Literatura Latinoamericana y del Caribe en Ciencias de la Salud (LILACS) y Biblioteca Científica Electrónica en Línea (SciELO), de 2013 a 2023, utilizando los trabajos científicos que cumplieron con los criterios de elegibilidad. Fueron seleccionados 9 artículos para componer este estudio, que destacan que las contribuciones del fisioterapeuta están dirigidas a la promoción de la salud y la prevención de enfermedades a través de actividades y acciones. Con esto, queda claro que el profesional de fisioterapia tiene un papel relevante en la APS, ya que a través de su trabajo, al igual que otros profesionales, contribuye a la promoción y prevención de la salud.

Descriptores: *Atención Primaria; Fisioterapeuta; Promoción de la Salud.*

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INTRODUCTION

Primary Health Care (PHC), which can also be called Primary Health Care (PHC), was defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1978. This form of PHC is based on methodology, practical techniques, and scientific evidence, and is universally applicable to individuals and families in the community¹.

It is the main gateway and continuity of care, providing, among other attributions, integrated services and coordinating the care of conditions in transition by other health services. It includes the promotion, protection, and prevention of diseases with the aim of developing integrated care that positively impacts the health status of individuals and communities in the context in which they are inserted².

The National Primary Care Policy (PNAB) arises from the knowledge collected by a group of entities that have historically contributed to the advancement and consolidation of the Unified Health System (SUS), such as social movements, users, health professionals, and leaders of the three levels of government³.

Thus, to expand the scope of PHC actions and their solutions, the Ministry of Health, in 2008, created the Expanded Family Health Center (NASF), composed of professionals from various areas of knowledge, including physiotherapists, who work with professionals from different areas of the Basic Health Unit (UBS), serving the population of their registered unit. With the reformulation and expansion of this strategy, what was previously known as NASF is now called the Multiprofessional Primary Care Team (eMulti). This change aims to strengthen multiprofessional care in PHC and resumes the experience of the NASF, which was a structuring part of the SUS³.

Currently, physical therapy has demonstrated the relevance of its role in the health care of the population, including itself in an increasingly expressive way within the three levels of care of the Unified Health System - SUS. Of these levels, PHC is the one under construction, as many professionals and users still see the physiotherapist as only a rehabilitator and their practice is concentrated at the secondary and tertiary levels. Demonstrating the relevance of their professional contributions in the practice of the Family Health Team (FHS) has been a challenge to be overcome for the training of providers and employees who have been part of the SUS for more than a decade⁴.

In view of this, it can be reiterated that physical therapists have the autonomy and qualification to perform various activities, such as patient evaluation, establishment of physical therapy diagnoses, planning, and programming of preventive activities, as well as health education, health service management, and issuance of reports for labor reasons, among others⁵.

Even with the scientific basis of the importance of including physical therapists in PHC, there seems to be a lot of uncertainty about the performance of these professionals at this level of care. Thus, this study raises the following question: what has been presented in the scientific literature about the contributions of the physical therapist's performance in the Primary Health Care scenario?

Thus, the present research has its justification in the sense of showing health professionals and service users the importance of the physical therapist's work and how their performance can benefit primary care, aiming to reinforce this level of health care.

The study is also relevant because it provides reflection to health professionals and future professionals regarding the importance of valuing the participation of physical therapists in health, especially in PHC, which should be the organizer and coordinator of health care.

Thus, in view of the above, the present research aims to analyze the contributions of physical therapists in the context of Primary Health Care in the scientific literature.

METHODS

This is an integrative review of the literature with a descriptive and exploratory approach.

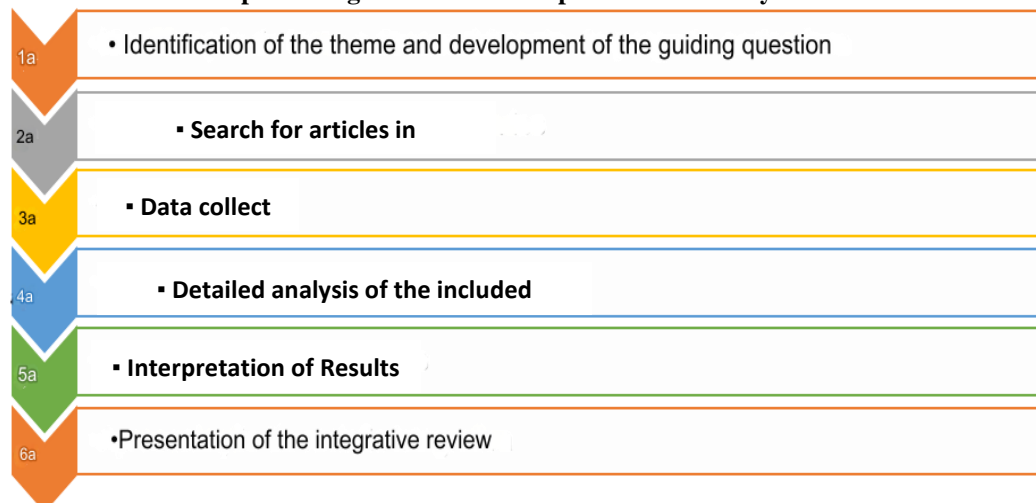
The integrative review is a study widely used in the health area, and may involve experimental and non-experimental research, using in its results ample information from studies already carried out on a given subject/theme, with the aim of promoting the best scientific foundation^{6,7}.

The exploratory study allows the researcher to be very close to the scope of study. In this way, making it clearer and easier to institute hypotheses, develop ideas and discover intuitions. The main purpose of this type of study is to solve problems, discover new ideas or improve intuitions on the subject⁸.

The search for data was carried out through the material available on the portal and in databases such as: Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro), Virtual Health Library (VHL), Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS) and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). Thus, the research was developed through three phases: planning, search, and data analysis.

The sample of this study was made up of articles available in full format, written in Portuguese and English in the period between 2013 and 2023, available in an *online* database, which in their context have some relationship with the objectives of the present study, integrative and bibliographic review studies and that discuss any of the descriptors presented. However, duplicate articles, those that did not meet the objectives of the research, manuals of official government publications, or legislation were excluded.

At first, the guiding research question was elaborated using the PICO strategy tool, an acronym for *patient (P)*, *intervention (I)*, *comparison (C)*, *outcomes (O)*⁹. Thus, the following were considered: Physical therapists working in Primary Health Care; I: Contributions of the physical therapist to health promotion and disease prevention; C: Absence of physical therapist intervention or interventions without a focus on health promotion and disease prevention in PHC; O: Impact of physical therapist contributions on health promotion and disease prevention in PHC. Through the strategy constructed, the research question was elaborated: what has been presented in the scientific literature about the contributions of the physiotherapist's performance in the Primary Health Care scenario? The study design was described in more detail and summarized in the following flowchart (Figure 01).

Figure 01 – Flowchart representing the construction phases of the study.

Source: Prepared by the Author (2023).

Data collection took place between July and September 2023, through secondary data in articles found in the databases mentioned above, in which a reflective reading of the abstracts was carried out, observing the content of each article. Based on this, those who met the aforementioned eligibility criteria were selected.

The health descriptors (DeCS/MeSH) used were primary care, physiotherapy, health promotion, in the selected databases, using the descriptors in Portuguese. It is important to highlight that among the descriptors, the Boolean operator "and" was used to correlate the terms used to achieve a result closer to the objective of the study.

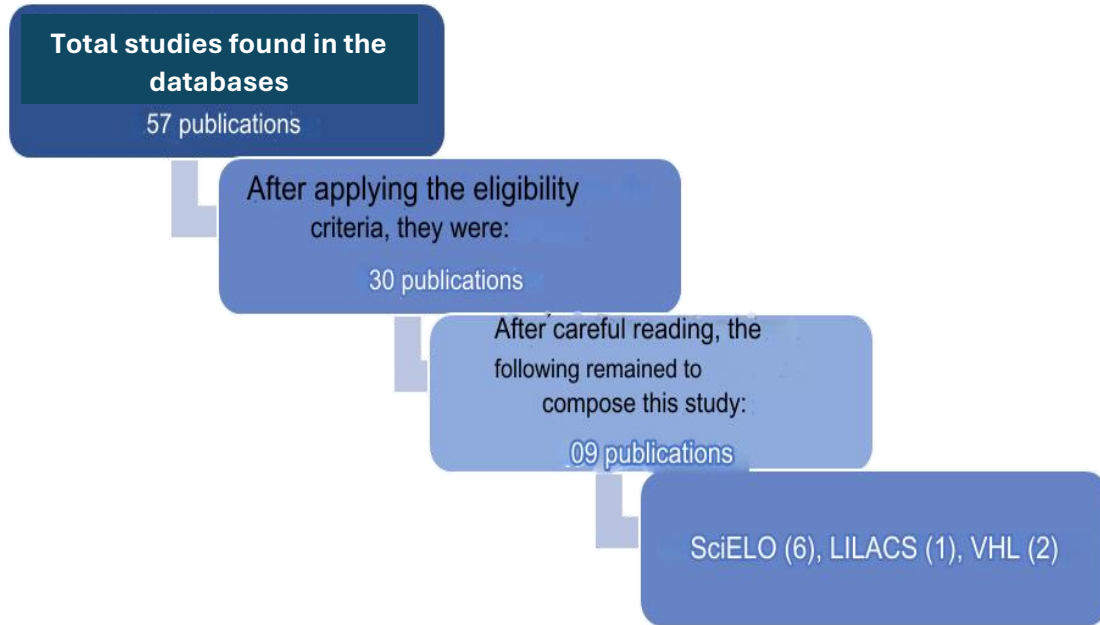
A table was constructed, which contains the following characteristics and/or information: title, authors/year, study objective, type of study, and main results. Subsequently, the collected data were organized into thematic categories when they were discussed.

RESULTS

The search in the electronic databases resulted in a total of 57 articles found, 15 in the VHL database, 31 in SciELO and 11 in LILACS. As a result, after applying the eligibility criteria, 30 publications remained. After a thorough reading, it was found that only 09 of the studies fit the objectives and guiding question of the study. Next, there is a flowchart (Figure 02) that shows how the selection of articles was developed.

The following table presents the main characteristics of the articles elected for this research, namely: title, authors/year, type of study, objective and results, with the objective of analyzing and synthesizing the main characteristics of nine selected articles, which address the role of physical therapists in PHC, their benefits, challenges and perceptions of health professionals and the community. Through the review of these studies, it is possible to obtain a comprehensive view of the importance and relevance of the presence of physical therapists at this level of health care, as well as their contributions to the promotion, prevention, recovery and maintenance of the health of the population served. The different approaches and results found in the selected articles offer valuable insights for understanding the role of the physiotherapist in PHC and in promoting comprehensive and effective care for patients.

Figure 02 – Flowchart representing the selection process of the studies that make up this research.



Source: Prepared by the Author (2023).

Chart 1 – Characterization of study variables.

No.	TITLE	AUTHOR/ YEAR	DESIGN OF STUDY	OBJECTIVE	RESULTS
1	Perspectives on the work of physical therapists in primary care: an integrative review	Alves <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Integrative Review	To investigate, through an integrative review, the importance, insertion and performance of Physical Therapy and the work developed by it with Primary Care.	Physical therapists are conquering their space in public health and acquiring importance in primary care services. The harmonious relationship between the physical therapist and the work in public health is generating new reflections on the performance of Physical Therapy, in view of a new logic of organization of health services.
2	Physical therapists' role in primary health care: what do community health agents know?	Batiston <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Cross-sectional study	To investigate the knowledge of the CHAs about the role of the physical therapist in PHC.	For the CHAs, the role of the physical therapist in PHC is related to individual, home care and rehabilitation.
3	Perception of the professionals of the Family Health Program about the need for the inclusion of the physiotherapist in the team	Ferretti; File; Zuffo (2014).	Qualitative study with data collection	To know the perception of the professionals of the Family Health Strategy (FHS) about the need to include the physiotherapist in the team.	The team affirms the need to include the physiotherapist professional in the strategy. However, their perception is that the physiotherapist works in secondary and tertiary care.
4	Physiotherapy in primary health care: an integrative review	Fonseca <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Integrative Review	To analyze the activities developed by physiotherapy in primary health care.	Seven articles were analyzed. The activities emphasized individual and collective care, both at the preventive and rehabilitation levels, with different audiences, and presented satisfactory results, with a positive impact on health and reduction of individual and collective costs.

5	The role of physical therapy in primary care: a systematic review of the literature	Morais <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Literature Review	To know the role of the physiotherapist in primary health care.	The Physical Therapy professional should be part of the FHP, where it is necessary to continuously search to ensure the quality of health work in an effective and safe way so that care in care is a fundamental link between the patient and the Physical Therapy professional.
6	Attributions of the physical therapist in primary health care: a literature review	Silva Junior; Nascimento (2015)	Bibliographic Study	To identify in the scientific literature the attributions of the Physical Therapist in PHC.	A total of 43 articles published between 2003 and 2013 were researched for this study, in which it was demonstrated that the presence of a Physical Therapist in PC is a relevant measure that contributes significantly to health promotion, prevention, recovery and maintenance.
7	Physical therapists' role in prevention and health promotion actions in Brazilian primary care: an integrative review	Silva <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Integrative Review	OBJECTIVE: To investigate the evidence in the literature on the role of physical therapists in actions aimed at prevention and health promotion in Brazilian primary care.	A total of 5 articles that met the eligibility criteria were selected. The activities performed by the professionals involved health education; home visits; group and individual care; waiting rooms; conversation circles; reception and identification of demands. Regarding the barriers, there were failures in the relationship with the team, lack of support for preventive actions, prevalence of the curative care model and lack of knowledge about the possibilities of contribution of Physical Therapy in primary care
8	The importance of including physical therapists in primary health care	Maia <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Literature review	To discuss the inclusion of physical therapists in public health programs at the primary care level.	Physical therapists can bring numerous benefits to their intervention in primary health care, such as establishing specific assessments, performing physical therapy diagnosis, providing measures to promote quality of life, thus favoring the user's well-being and ensuring the articulation between prevention and health promotion.
9	The importance of physical therapists in primary health care: a literature review	Vetelli <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Literature review	To emphasize the importance of physical therapists in primary health care and their inclusion in the family health strategy team	Physical therapists have been contributing to primary care due to the aptitudes and abilities inherent to their professional training, performing comprehensive care actions with assistance to children, adolescents, women, adults and the elderly, intervening in prevention through primary, secondary and tertiary care.

Source: Elaborado pelo Autor (2023).

DISCUSSION

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PHYSICAL THERAPIST TO HEALTH PROMOTION

Health promotion has always been one of the priorities of primary health care, which recognizes health as a dynamic state, influenced by multiple determinants (cultural,

social and economic). However, for this to happen, professionals working in primary care need to be proactive, have a broad (holistic) perspective and see themselves as integral actors in the process of rebuilding the system¹⁰.

In this case, although the therapeutic aspects of the physiotherapist are related to their profession, they are professionals with generalist training who have skills and abilities that enable them to work at any level of health. They can, therefore, provide health care that responds to the needs of society and adopt practices based on scientific evidence that aim to prevent and promote people's health and well-being¹¹.

Promotion and prevention are protagonists of health actions and are part of the workflow of physiotherapists in basic health units, emphasizing aspects relevant to the individual and the community to control damage, limit existing sequelae, prevent injuries, detect any pathological conditions early and change lives. This is the reality of the new PHC for physical therapy, designed to promote the well-being of users, protect their interests, and ensure health promotion¹².

In terms of developing personal skills, it should strive to develop healthy lifestyle habits, such as encouraging regular physical exercise; developing healthy eating habits; combating tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs; sex education for young people and adults; and encouraging people to value their own health and well-being in the community. Therefore, physical therapists will contribute to the development of health promotion¹³.

Physiotherapists, through their work, can contribute directly to various sectors of society and to health promotion, since they are directed to certain activities, such as: assessment of musculoskeletal and ergonomic functions; establishment of physical therapy diagnosis; interpretation of exams; prescriptions for therapeutic actions; planning intervention strategies and identifying goals, behaviors, and procedures; participate in the development of quality of life plans, especially health education, and recommend changes in lifestyle habits, through guidance to patients and their families⁵.

Thus, for Arruda *et al.* (2019), it is worth clarifying that physiotherapy is performed in all phases of the life cycle and is premised on the diversity of forms of care provided. In addition, as care is localized, the work of professionals must be designed for each real-life situation. This demonstrates the defense of a comprehensive physical therapy practice that meets the real needs of the enrolled population. Thus, the performance of this professional in PHC should be designed to involve the subject and/or his/her caregivers in daily care. In addition, health promotion and the expansion of care should be encouraged, and this goes beyond physical issues. Therefore, the whole context gives a special and innovative impulse to PHC physiotherapeutic care¹⁴.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PHYSICAL THERAPIST TO DISEASE PREVENTION

In primary health care, physiotherapists can contribute to the formulation and execution of various actions (individual or collective), such as those aimed at disease prevention, rehabilitation, or health education, taking into account that their training aims to provide professionals with skills and competencies that allow them to ensure comprehensive care. However, not all Brazilian municipalities benefit from the role of physical therapists in primary care, considering that several teams that work in basic health units still do not have the participation of this professional¹⁵.

There are important reports in the scientific literature documenting the different possibilities of public health work defended by this professional. It is believed that incorporating it into public health planning at the primary care level can bring enormous benefits to social health and municipal management⁵.

The term "prevention" allows physical therapists to work in primary care settings, where disease prevention should be the primary focus of their work. Its functions are to provide education, prevention and assistance in primary health care, integrate multidisciplinary teams focused on the planning, control and implementation of projects and programs. In addition, it is worth emphasizing the diversity of teams within which physical therapists can perform their activities and the target audiences, covering all life cycles, making evident the need for physical therapists to work in primary care centers¹⁶.

Working as a team, physiotherapists can plan, implement, control and enforce public health policies, acting holistically in all phases of an individual's life cycle and providing comprehensive care to families, from childhood to old age. Thus, physiotherapy should not be totally individualized, but should also emphasize group care, with the aim of prevention and health promotion. From an interdisciplinary perspective, it is a professional practice based on collective decision-making⁴.

THE WORK OF THE PHYSIOTHERAPIST AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS IN PHC

Physical therapists are present in PHC and can be integrated into multidisciplinary health teams. The difficulty of integrating physiotherapists into primary health care is that their training has historically been focused on individual care, with a focus on pathology and rehabilitation, with an emphasis on specialized care, but largely due to the lack of knowledge of physiotherapists about the potential of this level of care practice, as well as other health professionals, Administrators and citizens¹⁷.

Therefore, physiotherapy in primary health care is evolving, as its incorporation benefits people through qualified and specific care in an effective way, promotes and prevents injuries, assists the patient in a holistic and interdisciplinary way, enabling them to save their own citizenship and protection, also emphasizing the expansion of areas of professional and social action that directly benefit public health. The managers of the processes of organization of health services have been described as common references that show how difficult it is to expand and persist in the insertion of physical therapists, since, notoriously, the competence and training to provide care at all levels of health are perceived¹⁸.

Primary health care users, who benefit from the services provided by physical therapy, recognize that it is valuable for the FHS, as it facilitates access to the services provided, improves care, and removes the stigma of the rehabilitating physical therapist, promoting the appreciation of these professionals¹⁹.

The activities carried out include formation of educational activity groups, orientations, evaluations, waiting rooms, dialogue circles, seminars, participation in the School Health Program (PSE), continuing education of professionals, shared home visits, and individual or group physical rehabilitation care¹⁰.

It is important to emphasize that the development of home visits, individual consultations and other activities have characteristics of change in the traditional model

of care/assistance and give more attention to the autonomy and participatory care of the subjects of health promotion and development. In addition, it is worth noting that collective activities overlap individual activities, defining the profile of multiprofessional performance. However, this task is not easy, with daily challenges related to interprofessionalism, work management, as well as the infrastructure of the service environment¹³.

Thus, the involvement of physical therapy in PHC is an imperative contribution that can facilitate greater decision-making with other professionals. Their integration into the team involves creating intersections, promoting and encouraging ideas that align with a holistic vision and practice of health. Ideally, the action should be carried out at a collective level, with the participation of the people. Action should be coordinated with different sectors of society and governments, with a focus on reversing social determinants and health status¹².

This discussion is extremely important for public health, as it highlights the essential role of the physiotherapist in health promotion and disease prevention. Physical therapists, with their generalist training and specific skills, can work at any level of health, offering care based on scientific evidence to prevent diseases and promote people's well-being¹².

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to understand the contributions of physical therapists in the context of primary health care. Thus, the objective of the research was achieved, in which its contributions to PHC, health promotion and disease prevention were discussed.

Thus, it was possible to perceive that the role of the physiotherapist is indispensable in the context of PHC, since he contributes significantly to the activities and actions that favor health promotion and prevention. In addition, the intervention of this professional is as fundamental as that of other professionals since all of them can contribute to the resolution of health issues at the primary level.

Therefore, this study reinforces the importance of inserting and valuing physical therapists in Primary Health Care, contributing significantly to health promotion, disease prevention, and improvement of people's quality of life. Its actions cover not only the physical aspect, but also the emotional, social and community aspect, demonstrating the relevance of the physiotherapist as an agent of transformation and health promotion at a collective level.

Finally, in view of the contributions of physical therapists to PHC, it is essential that new research be carried out to strengthen the scientific literature on the subject in question, especially to emphasize how important the intervention and participation of this professional is at the primary health level, providing comprehensive care to users.

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