Physiotalk: connectedness and constructive change - a qualitative study

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Introduction
Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is mandatory for UK physiotherapists and valued internationally. Barriers exist to accessing and engaging in CPD including funding and time related pressures. In an increasingly digital age social media, specifically Twitter, may provide a source of up-to-date knowledge and professional development that can support CPD in line with registrant standards. However, there is a lack of research into whether a professionally based tweetchat provides relevant CPD that has an impact on individual practice as well as service provision.

Purpose
This study aims to explore impacts of taking part in physiotalk tweetchats on CPD and professional practice, from participants’ perspectives.

Methods
Two phases of data collection were conducted using a qualitative Phenomenological approach. Potential participants were users of the physiotalk tweetchats or website and invited to participate through promotional tweets and blog postings. Stage 1 involved an online semi-structured focus group through a #physiotalk tweetchat. Questions addressed meaning and use of physiotalk, structured focus group through a #physiotalk tweetchat. Participants reported that this virtual environment enabled constructive change at an individual level, such as increased confidence, broadening views and engagement with research and evidence. At a local level, participants found that tweets chats informed practice through knowledge transfer, networking and discussion. National and international impacts were also evident, through development of collaborations and use of physiotalk as a platform for representation and influencing others. These themes were found to be interlinked as illustrated in the explanatory theory of tweetchat generation of professional connectedness and constructive change (Figure one). The tweets shown illustrate the evidence for these themes and interlinkages.

Results
586 tweets were sent during 75 minutes of discussion between 70 tweeting participants. The tweet analysis resulted in themes that described physiotalk as enabling social media skills development and engagement, and facilitating ring-fenced and structured interactions. Participants felt that chats focused on topics relevant to practice, and generated a supportive, non-hierarchical international community that included physiotherapists, other professionals and service users.

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Key learning
The results of this Twitter focus group demonstrate that where people feel facilitated and welcomed in an online discussion forum, there is great potential for constructive change at individual, local, national and international levels. This may lead to developments that impact positively on patients and professionals. This is, but also goes beyond, CPD for participants. It is important to note that there is only a small pool of people who regularly engage in physiotalk tweetchats. Further exploration of barriers to engagement is important as well as possible ways of increasing participation to achieve these benefits more widely.

Implications
Tweetchats can be promoted as a valid and freely available form of CPD, enabling international viewpoints to be shared. Networks and collaborations formed through these chats can lead to wider constructive change in practice and the profession.

The benefits of tweetchats as a professional development tool should be explored by more individuals and organisations seeking skills development, as well as those trying to overcome barriers to social media engagement by students and qualified professionals. The results may also be applicable to other tweetchat communities.

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