

TAKING EACH GAME AS IT COMES? EXPLORING OPINION AMONGST PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PHYSIOTHERAPISTS REGARDING THEIR ROLE IN MANAGEMENT OF THE LONG-TERM MUSCULOSKELETAL HEALTH OF PLAYERS.

Wainwright TW<sup>1</sup>, Dalley J<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>The Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust. <sup>2</sup>The Physiotherapy Subject Group, Coventry University

**Purpose:** To explore opinion amongst physiotherapists working with professional footballers on their role in promoting long-term musculoskeletal health.

**Relevance:** Recent research suggests that retired professional football players have a higher propensity for Osteoarthritis (OA) than age-matched individuals. This can be attributed to the high level of injury risk in football and the desire of players to play through and return prematurely from injury. Such pressures place the physiotherapist in a challenging position if they are successfully to manage the short and long-term musculoskeletal health of their patients.

**Subjects:** Head Physiotherapists (91) of the professional football clubs in all divisions in England and Wales.

**Method:** A postal questionnaire was chosen for data collection with the aim of covering a large geographical area in a cost and time efficient manner.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Closed questions were used for demographic data and these were analysed using descriptive statistics. Open questions were used to allow exploration of the participant's views. The responses for each open question were transcribed to allow common themes to be identified.

**Results:** The response rate of 53% from across all the football divisions, whilst low, compares favorably with published surveys in this field. The physiotherapist's role in long-term health promotion was identified as advice, education and injury-prevention screening programmes. Physiotherapists face pressures to return players quickly from injury, which may sometimes inhibit their ability to promote long-term musculoskeletal health. Barriers to long-term health are short-term player contracts and the influence of others in the decision-making process.

**Conclusions:** Suggestions for improvements are the increased use of screening programmes, targeted rehabilitation programmes, the education of players, managers and coaches, and an alteration in the frequency-pattern between training programmes and matches. The reduction of injury rate could increase long-term player availability for matches and reduce the possible long-term effects to musculoskeletal health.