



Understanding the Future of Physiotherapy: Insights from Professor David Nicholls

I was honoured to chair the second day's keynote address. Professor David Nicholls, from the University of Auckland, tackled some of the most pressing issues facing the field of physiotherapy today. Although he was unable to attend in person due to postgraduate commitments, Dave delivered an excellent, thought-provoking talk that was recorded for wider accessibility. I am sure that it will be released through the IFOMPT website soon. Given the breadth and depth of his talk, what I mention below gives a glint and an overview of its content.

Contemporary Challenges in Physiotherapy

Dave began by outlining the myriad challenges currently confronting the physiotherapy profession. These challenges encompass social, educational, and technological transformations that impact all healthcare professions, including physiotherapy. Among these issues are chronic complex comorbidities, public funding cuts, declining trust in authority figures, unmet healthcare needs, and a widening social gradient. He highlighted the increasing competition in the healthcare marketplace and the democratisation of knowledge through platforms like YouTube, which now offer vast amounts of information previously accessible only through professional training.

Specifically, he noted concerns about the physiotherapy profession being spread too thin, with a declining status, being encroached upon from other professional groups, and a lack of clear future direction. He pointed out the profession's limited tools for social, philosophical, and historical analysis and the general disappointment in the outcomes of evidence-based practice. The shift from an acute, curative model to one that handles chronic conditions has also posed significant challenges.

Forces Shaping the Future

Dave identified three major forces radically reshaping physiotherapy: late capitalism, unbundling, and digital disruption.

1. Late Capitalism

Dave explained how the transition from early to late capitalism has created a new market within the body and health. This economic shift has opened healthcare to private practice, turning the body into a market for capitalist expansion. He highlighted the atomisation of the body into numerous problems, each requiring its own expert, leading to increased anxiety and consumption of health-related products and services.

2. Unbundling of Expertise

He discussed the critical view of professions as self-interested and elitist, losing their altruistic image portrayed years ago. The unbundling of expertise has led to a loss of professional monopoly, allowing new experts to emerge and challenge traditional professional roles. He warned of the negative effects, or “professogenic effects,” on society, such as limiting access to healthcare in impoverished areas while clustering services in affluent urban areas. The “professogenic effect” is akin to the “iatrogenic effect” in which a side-effect of treatment manifests deleteriously on the health and wellbeing of a patient. The “professogenic effect” are the negative effects on society that are systematically produced by having professions in the first place. For example, by having professions that limit access to healthcare services they serve to maintain a monopoly control over the market.

3. Digital Disruption

The rise of digital technologies, such as AI and machine learning, is transforming healthcare delivery. He emphasised that these tools, with their vast storage and processing capabilities, are reshaping how people access information and services. He cited examples like [AI-driven diagnostic and rehabilitation services](#), which are challenging traditional physiotherapy models by offering personalised, 24/7 accessible care at lower costs.

Dave then outlined four potential responses to these challenges within the healthcare professions, all of which are unsatisfactory, drawing from his previous [work](#):

Watching and Waiting

This approach involves maintaining the status quo, which, while comforting for practitioners, risks obsolescence and being outpaced by more agile competition.

Modern Heritage

This response advocates a return to traditional practices and core strengths. While it provides a clear identity and continuity, it risks appearing conservative and resistant to necessary change.

Renaissance

This approach calls for a radical redefinition of physiotherapy, moving away from the body-as-machine model to a more humanistic, person-centred practice. However, it risks alienating the medical profession and complicates the understanding of pain and illness.

Hybrid Approach

Combining the best of traditional and new practices, this approach aims to be holistic and expansive. However, it may lead to a loss of clear professional identity and philosophical coherence.

Embracing Post-Professionalism

Dave concluded by urging the profession to embrace the post-professional era as an opportunity for reinvention. He suggested “hollowing out” the profession by removing routine, standardised tasks and focusing on the core intensities that have always defined the physical therapies. This

approach involves removing anything that can be easily replaced by cheaper alternatives or automated systems, thereby preserving the unique, most impactful aspects of physiotherapy.

Ultimately, Dave advocated for a future where physical therapies are returned to the commons, made accessible to all, and reimagined in collaboration with human and non-human communities, situated in an ecological landscape. This vision aims not to preserve the traditional professional identity but to make the benefits of physical therapies widely available and adaptable for the future.

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