Happy Women’s History Month! Every March, we celebrate and recognize all the remarkable contributions and accomplishments made by women. The physical therapy profession is a profession that was started during the Polio epidemic by women, specifically Mary McMillan, also known as the “founding mother of PT”. Once the Polio epidemic became more controlled, McMillan saw the need to grow the PT profession, and later formed a national organization called the American Women’s Physical Therapy Association, now known as the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

Today, women make up 70% of the PT profession. Despite this statistic, a gender wage gap still manages to exist within the profession. Although the physical therapy profession does not deal with the same women’s rights issues as other fields, there is unfortunately a large difference in pay for women in comparison to men physical therapists. According to a 2020 workforce analysis report by the APTA, female PTs earned 80% of what their male counterparts earned, and female PTAs earned 89% of their male counterparts. This statistic highlights that there is a clear disconnect between the value women bring to the table and the level of compensation they receive—specifically compared to men who perform the same job functions. As we highlight these disparities, we aim to consider solutions to this ongoing issue that transcends even beyond our profession. Ultimately, creating a more equitable and diverse profession will take all our help.
How would you explain your journey/experiences in Physical Therapy?

I decided that I wanted to teach in a PT program while I was finishing up my degree in PT. At that time, PT was very protocol driven and under detailed scripts from physicians – so wasn’t quite the challenge I thought it would be. Because I was (and still am) interested in how movement is controlled, I found a master’s program in bioengineering at Purdue that had courses in motor control. While working on the master’s degree I worked at Home Hospital in Lafayette, initially in orthopedics. I noticed that the orders for patients with neurological disorders were “evaluate and treat” rather than detailed – so I switched over to working with that population and loved it. After graduating with the masters, I went and taught at TWU for one year. I then moved back to the Chicago area to teach in Northwestern’s program (so not too short to teach) and pursue my doctorate in biomedical engineering (emphasis on motor control). During this time, I also provided contract care at RIC (the program was on the 13th floor and PT was on the 12th). I have enjoyed all aspects of my career (except may be the endless paperwork) and have never considered changing what I am doing.

Any advice that you currently know now that you would have given yourself as a freshly graduated PT?

Seek out challenging positions that will let you grow. Go to as many meetings and workshops you can and start networking as a student.

Definitions

Gender pay gap: a measure of pay disparity between men and women. While it can be measured in different ways, the data are clear: women are still paid much less relative to men.

Sex vs Gender: Sex is related to the reproductive function of a person (male, female, intersex). Gender is how a person identifies, more related to social constructs and roles within society (he/his/him, she/her/ hers, them).

Equity: the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while also striving to identify and eliminate barriers that may lead to unfair practices.

Resources

- APTA Physical Therapy Workforce Analysis
- It’s Time to Close the PT Gender Pay Gap
- 8 Famous Women PTs from History
- Can we talk about the gender pay

Favorite Joke?

Did you hear that Snap, Crackle, and Pop were murdered?

They suspect a “cereal” killer 😂