Research in the Spotlight

GUARDIAN exercise rehabilitation

Thirty years of research on physical activity, mental health, and wellbeing: A scientometric analysis of hotspots and trends.

The objective:

The sheer volume of research publications on physical activity, mental health, and wellbeing is overwhelming, and the purpose of this study was to conduct a scientometric analysis of themes and trends over recent decades within this field.

Whilst systematic reviews and meta-analysis are valuable in narrowing the lens on a very specific question, they cannot determine research trends, of which can be useful to inform the most appropriate direction for future research.

This paper is the first of its kind as there has been no previous scientometric study of research trends and influence networks of physical activity, mental health and wellbeing.

What they did:

- In total, over 55,000 academic and research papers were reviewed via a scientometric analysis using key words such as 'mental health', 'physical activity, 'exercise' and 'wellbeing'.
- The primary outcome was to analyse research trends on physical activity related to mental health and wellbeing and to determine key trends using co-cited references and co-occurring keywords.
- The secondary outcome was to provide clinicians, researchers, and policymakers with a specific unit of measure of the research network and to identify emerging trends and limitations.

What they found:

Major research trends were identified on physical activity:

- Cardiovascular diseases
- Somatic disorders
- Cognitive decline/dementia
- Mental illness
- Athletes' performance
- Eating disorders, and most recently;
- COVID-19 pandemic

Over recent times, since 2014, research trends show a focus on greenness/urbanicity, concussion/chronic traumatic encephalopathy, and COVID-19. Although various trends of research have developed these last decades, the authors were able to identify two important gaps - one being the roles of physical activity in the prevention of treatment of substance-use disorders, and one regarding socioeconomic inequalities in access to physical exercise.

Clinical implications:

The authors suggest that the 'results strengthen and expand the central role of physical activity in public health, calling for the systematic involvement of physical activity professionals as stakeholders in public health decision-making process'.

Reference

Sebe, M et al. 2022. Thirty years of research on physical activity, mental health, and wellbeing: A scientometric analysis of hotspots and trends. *Frontiers in Public Health.*