

## Ten years of *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs in Physical Therapy in Brazil: what has changed?

### WHAT WAS THE SITUATION?

From a dream to reality and from this to the prospects...

More than a decade ago there was the prospect that one day Brazilian Physical Therapy might have its own master's and doctoral programs, but this was still an almost unattainable dream, since the destiny of lecturers for Physical Therapy courses had, until then, been to seek qualifications in foreign countries, at great personal cost, or to do so in Brazil in correlated fields like Anatomy, Physiology or Education, among others, in which the main concentration was certainly not Physical Therapy.

### HOW DID IT ALL START?

It was with great enthusiasm and a good dose of professional idealism, plus a lot of hard work and dedication, that this dream became a reality. On December 20, 1996, the Ministry of Education (MEC), through the Coordination Office for Improvement of Higher-Level Personnel (CAPES), officially authorized the functioning of the first Brazilian master's program in Physical Therapy, at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar). Thus, at the beginning of 1997, the selection process for the first master's degree candidates in Physical Therapy in Brazil was opened. From then on, Brazilian Physical Therapy went through a process that few Brazilian physical therapists had any experience of: becoming formally integrated with the Brazilian scientific community. It must be emphasized that the Brazilian *Stricto Sensu* teaching system is very narrowly defined, albeit transparent and well publicized, as can be seen on the CAPES website itself.

### DID THIS MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO BRAZILIAN PHYSICAL THERAPY?

Within this context, Physical Therapy, with its *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate program, also became part of the rigid assessment process of CAPES, which follows rules that have been very well established by the worldwide scientific community and are constant undergoing refinement. This therefore makes competitiveness multidisciplinary and universal. Through this, we sought to emphasize that, different from the extremely poor assessment process that undergraduate programs in our country go through, and totally different from *Lato Sensu* (specialization) postgraduate programs, which hardly undergo any assessment at all, *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs go through a rigid process of continual yearly and three-yearly assessment. These assessments give scores to the existing programs, such that permission to operate the program might be withdrawn in the event of insufficient competence or higher ratings (good or very good) might be awarded if the quality of the program merits this. Through this assessment process, Physical Therapy teachers working within these programs have been able to gain an awareness of the rules and criteria that guide the foundations for scientific development in a wide variety of fields of knowledge. Thus, Physical Therapy has become formally included within this "scientific world", which has evidently made an important and substantial difference!

### WHAT IS THE SITUATION TODAY?

Time has gone by and the prospects have continued to grow in this field, which is still young but is characterized by enthusiasm for facing new challenges. Among these is the search for solutions to resolve certain problems, such as the lack of specialized human resources and especially the lack of teaching staff qualifications for meeting the growing demand from undergraduate courses in this country. It must be emphasized that the demand from the Physical Therapy community was very large, because only ten physical therapists per year were graduating with master's degrees, for the enormous number of existing undergraduate Physical Therapy courses, not to mention the unrestrained growth in the number of such courses in Brazil. Over the years, various groups of teachers involved in this capacitation process for Physical Therapy teachers in this country have exerted great efforts in this process. Today, Brazilian Physical Therapy has eight academic master's programs and three doctoral programs (UFSCar; UNITRI; UFMG; USP; UNIMEP; UNICID; UFRN and UNINOVE), which are specific to the field and supply around 80 physical therapists with master's degrees and 16 with doctoral degrees annually. These data certainly communicate to the Brazilian Physical Therapy community what changes there have been through the creation of these *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs, especially for the teaching staff of undergraduate Physical Therapy courses in Brazil. Today, the higher education institutions have sufficient numbers of staff with master's and doctoral degrees in the field of Physical Therapy. However, this is not enough, since Brazilian Physical Therapy needs to be able to count on excellence in

master's and doctoral degrees. To this end, efforts have been exerted within *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs and, as a result, there are now master's and doctoral programs with the highest ratings from CAPES (good and very good).

#### **WHAT CONTRIBUTION HAVE THE POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMS BROUGHT TO BRAZILIAN PHYSICAL THERAPY?**

Today, Brazilian scientific production has not only substantially increased, as has been seen in most scientific events in this field, but also its level and quality has greatly improved. The concomitant evolution that has taken place in our scientific periodicals must also be noted, and in particular with regard to the Brazilian Journal of Physical Therapy / Revista Brasileira de Fisioterapia (Rev Bras de Fisioter). In a way that has been very similar to the development of *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs, and over approximately the same period of time, this journal, which today is the only periodical within the field of Physical Therapy that is indexed in the *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO), after going through an arduous process of qualitative assessment, has also gained unparalleled rating recognition (indexation) within Brazilian Physical Therapy. Thus, it can be emphasized that one important change that has taken place in Brazilian Physical Therapy over these ten years has been the development of formal scientific production through the *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs and the qualitative advance in publishing this knowledge through Rev Bras de Fisioter. Both of these have had a strong and positive impact on the scientific development of Brazilian Physical Therapy.

#### **WHAT WILL THE SITUATION BE IN THE FUTURE?**

We are obviously not in a position to predict the future, but it is not impossible to detect certain phenomena, especially with regard to prospects and particularly for a specific field of knowledge. There is no doubt that this evolutive process can only bring new advances for Brazilian Physical Therapy. Nevertheless, despite the achievements made within the field of Brazilian Physical Therapy, it would be illusory for us to think that we are free from possible new problems. Exactly ten years ago, the new guideline and foundation law for Brazilian Education (LDB No. 9.394), which coincidentally was sanctioned on the same date as the authorization for the first Physical Therapy master's program (on December 20, 1996), brought in strong repercussions for Brazilian undergraduate teaching. Some of these were markedly perverse with regard to the quality of education in this country, especially if the excessive "autonomy" of higher education institutions is considered; many of these, unfortunately, are not committed to the quality of their own higher-level teaching. Whereas previously there had been a strong requirement that higher education institutions should hire teachers with master's and doctoral degrees, with the new law this requirement was reduced to just one third of the whole teaching staff of each institution. In this respect, with the exception of the public higher education institutions (which represent a small proportion), the great majority of the higher education institutions are, either through ironic destiny or due to government policies that are unconcerned with the quality of undergraduate teaching in this country, no longer attracting the principal product from *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs, i.e. the physical therapists with master's or doctoral degrees, who represent qualified human resources (capacitated teaching staff). In the light of this situation, it is not difficult to risk the prediction that, within a short space of time, all the efforts and all the investment achieved by Brazilian Physical Therapy regarding the capacitation of its graduate teaching staff may be transformed into disappointment, if it is found that good physical therapists with master's and doctoral degrees are to be found among the ranks of the unemployed.

On this occasion, it is fitting to record not only the glories achieved over these ten years but also the need for great vigilance by all Brazilian physical therapists, and especially among the teaching staff and higher education institutions that are still concerned about good quality in higher education. This is not only a task for the academic environment, but also one for the entities representing our profession.

Even in the light of these realities, the *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs are unceasingly undergoing refinements and seeking better scores in rating assessments, thereby setting an example of a field that tirelessly fights for growth and qualitative development.

#### **CONCLUSION**

For all these reasons, we take advantage of this opportunity to congratulate the researchers and students involved in *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate Physical Therapy programs for their path followed over these ten years, and also for their important work contributing towards the scientific development of Brazilian Physical Therapy!

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