Physical therapy treatment in incontinent women provided by a Public Health Service

Fisioterapia em mulheres incontinentes atendidas em um serviço público de saúde

Daniela D’Attilio Toledo[a], Anny Caroline Dedicação [b], Maria Elisabete Salina Saldanha[c], Miriam Haddad[d], Patricia Driusso[e]

[a] Specialist in Integrated Physiotherapy in Women’s Health at Universidade de São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, SP - Brazil.
[b] Enhancement in Integrated Physiotherapy in Women’s Health at Maternidade Hospital Leonor Mendes de Barros, São Paulo, SP - Brazil.
[c] Master in Morphology at Federal University of São Paulo, professor of the Physiotherapy course at Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP - Brazil.
[d] Gynecologist at Maternidade Hospital Leonor Mendes de Barros São Paulo, SP - Brazil.
[e] PhD in Sciences at Federal University of São Carlos, professor of Physiotherapy course at Universidade Federal de São Carlos, São Carlos, SP - Brazil, e-mail: pdriusso@ufscar.br

Abstract

Introduction: Urinary incontinence affects more than 50 million people worldwide, it has a great impact on quality of life by affecting social, domestic, occupational and sex life, regardless of age. Objective: The objective of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of physical therapy treatment in women attending the Urogynecology service of Hospital and Maternity Leonor Mendes de Barros. Method: We retrospectively assessed 65 records of patients with diagnosis of urinary incontinence treated between November 2005 and November 2006. In order to have their data analyzed, patients were divided into two groups; group MF, which underwent medical treatment and physiotherapy, and group M, which had only medical treatment. In order to compare both groups’ quantitative data, the analysis was performed in Statistica® software using Mann Whitney’s non-parametric test. The analysis of association between the quantitative variables was performed through the Chi-Square test at 5% (p ≥ 0.05) significance level. Results: We observed that 60.6% of patients who underwent physical therapy treatment and medical treatment had the urinary incontinence symptoms decreased or completely cured, while 80% of women belonging to the medical treatment
Urinary incontinence affects more than 50 million people worldwide, from which 13 million are in the USA (8, 9). It is a common problem affecting women of all ages. Epidemiological studies performed in young adults show a prevalence varying between 30 and 55% (10). Institutionalized elderly women are the most affected by UI, whose prevalence progressively increases with age (8, 11, 12). From those women affected, 30% were below 60 years old, and 41-57% were over 65 years old (13, 14); 20-35% lived in communities and 30-60% were institutionalized (8, 15, 16).

Urinary incontinence substantially impairs one’s quality of life (QL) by affecting social, domestic, occupational and sex life, regardless of age. According to Monz et al. (17) and Ghoniem et al. (18), the more severe symptoms are, the more they affect the QL. Shame prevents patients from seeking medical care and restricts their social lives, thus leading them to isolation.

Medical care is carefully evaluated and prescribed by physicians due to its side effects. OB is the UI type with greater response to medical care, allowing the only-group underwent surgery. **Conclusion:** Thus, we conclude that physical therapy is essential in treatment protocols of urinary incontinence outpatient clinics and to prevent surgery.

**Keywords:** Urinary incontinence. Physical therapy treatment. Surgery.

**Introduction**

The International Continence Society (ICS) had recently defined Urinary Incontinence (UI) as “any involuntary loss of urine” (1). UI can be classified according to its symptoms, clinical findings and additional examinations, as: Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI), Overactive Bladder (OB) or Mixed Urinary Incontinence (MUI) (2).

The SUI is characterized by involuntary urine loss, when intravesical pressure exceeds the maximum urethral pressure in the absence of detrusor urenae muscle contraction. It usually happens when the person coughs, sneezes, laughs, jumps or even performs activities such as changing body position (3, 4). The OB is characterized by involuntary urine loss while feeling strong desire to urinate, whether the bladder is full or not, and is associated with increased urinary frequency, nocturia and urge incontinence. The symptoms are usually caused by involuntary detrusor urenae muscle contractions (5, 6). The MUI is characterized by the symptoms of both incontinence types described above (7).
use of anticholinergics, alpha-agonists and tricyclic antidepressants. The latter is the most recommend-
ed, as it provides better results and fewer side effects (19, 20). The use of sacral neuromodulators and minimally invasive intervention stand out among surgical interventions, as these practices were ap-
proved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in 2002, to be employed in overactive bladder (21) treatment. Surgical options to treat SUI may include abdominoal and vaginal procedures, laparoscopy
and related practices (22).

The physical therapy treatment is aimed at re-
store patients’ continence and improving their
quality of life. There are several physiotherapy op-
tions for incontinent patients: kinesiotherapy, bio-
feedback, vaginal cone and electropathy. According
to Aslan et al. (23), such results decrease urinary
loss from 30 to 50% within a twelve-month period.
The proper contraction of the pelvic floor (PF) mus-
cles, especially the levator ani muscle, has been an
efficient way to treat patients with UI and improve
their toilet training (24, 25).

Biofeedback is a therapeutic resource ef-
ciently used to treat women with UI by itself
or together with other therapies (26). By means
of audible or visual biofeedback, the patient ac-
quires information on the physiological process
of contraction, which was unknown in most cases
until then (27). Aukeee et al. (28) observed signifi-
cant improvement in the strengthening of the PF
muscle in women with UI who had undergone bio-
feedback and kinesiotherapy treatment, within a
twelve-year period. Morkved e Fjortoft (29) com-
pared women with SUI who had performed PF
functional training exercises with women who had
been trained with biofeedback, and observed 58%
improvement in women who had used biofeedback
and 46% in those who had only exercised. Aksac
et al. (30) also studied the effects of perennial ex-
ercise and biofeedback, and observed improved
strength in both groups; however, there was great-
er gain in the group trained with biofeedback.

Electro stimulation can be performed through
percutaneous, intravaginal or intrarectal application
(31). The intracavitary way activates the afferent
pudendal nerve, thus facilitating effenter response
and causing the contraction of smooth and striated
muscles in the paraurethral and PF region. The per-
cutaneous application through the sacral roots or
posterior tibial nerve act in the neuromodulation
of the detrusor urinae muscle (32) activities, pro-
viding 60% general improvement in symptoms
and significant statistical decrease in loss, number
of absorbents used, frequency and nocturia (33).
Although ES had been proved to be an useful thera-
peutic alternative for women with SUI, by achieving
a 82.34% improvement rate (34, 35), its better re-
sults were achieved in patients with OB (32, 35, 36).
A frequency between 35 and 50Hz (34) is used for
the SUI treatment, while the OB treatment requires
a frequency between 5 and 20 Hz (37).

The objective of this study was to verify the effec-
tiveness of physical therapy in treating urinary incon-
tinence, considering the muscular strength of pelvic
floor, urinary frequency, nocturia and continence.

Materials and methods

We performed a retrospective study of patients
who underwent medical treatment for urinary in-
continence at the Urogynecology Sector of Hospital
Maternity Leonor Mendes de Barros, between
November 2005 and November 2006. Patients were
selected by means of an urodynamic examination
registration program and were divided into two
groups; from which one was going to undergo phys-
ical therapy (MF) while the other not (M).

During this period, 89 women had undergone
the urodynamic examination. Patients with neu-
rological diseases, diabetic neuropathy, congenital
urologic disease, bladder cancer and neurogenic
bladder were excluded from the study.

Thus, 72 patients were contacted by telephone
and/or at the hospital’s Urogynecology Sector (an-
nual gynecological follow-up and/or participa-
tion in treatment groups) and were informed on
the characteristics of the project (15 had changed
their phone numbers and one had died). 65 women
agreed to make their data available for this research
and signed a Free and Clarified Consent Term, ac-
cording to resolution 196/96 of the National Health
Council. The research was approved by the Ethics
Committee of Maternity Hospital Leonor Mendes de
Barros, according to Opinion No. 13198462.

The group MF (n = 33) was comprised of pa-
tients who underwent physical therapy, regardless
of the treatment performed (technique and number
of sessions), simultaneously to the medical treat-
ment. Group M (n = 32) was comprised of women
sent to physical therapy treatment by the medical staff, but who did not attend the sessions whether for the lack of scheduling, time or money. In order to compare both groups’ quantitative data, the analysis was performed in the Statistica® software using Mann Whitney’s non-parametric test. The analysis of association between the quantitative variables was performed through the Chi-Square test at 5% (p ≥ 0.05) significance level.

Results

The average age of volunteers taking part in this study was 50.51 ± 10.63. Women from the group that underwent physical therapy treatment had an average age of 53.68 ± 10.08 (37-77) years, while the average age of women comprising the group who did not take physiotherapy was of 47 ± 10.27 years (p = 0.06).

Table 1 shows the characterization of both groups based on the urinary incontinence diagnosis. One can notice the prevalence of SUI, followed by OB and MUI in both groups. According to the Chi-Square test, there was no statistical difference between the groups (p = 0.54).

Table 2 - Characterization of the number of pregnancies and obstetric background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group MF</th>
<th>Group M</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy average</td>
<td>4.8 ± 2.8</td>
<td>5.4 ± 2.8</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal delivery</td>
<td>3.9 ± 2.2</td>
<td>4.3 ± 2.6</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesarean delivery</td>
<td>1 ± 0.74</td>
<td>1.1 ± 0.3</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 - Characterization regarding sexual complaint and previous surgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group MF</th>
<th>Group M</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual complaint</td>
<td>57.50%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UI previous surgery</td>
<td>27.20%</td>
<td>15.62%</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the percentage of women who were medically discharged and underwent surgery. One can notice that there was a higher frequency of cure and lower frequency of surgeries among women who underwent physical therapy treatment.

Table 5 shows data collected in the physical therapy treatment (group FM). The physical therapy treatment varied from 4 to 15 sessions (8.7 ± 3.4).

Discussion

According to Aldrigui et al. (38), the prevalence of UI in women increases with age, and according to Lacima et al. (39), UI affects from 10-30% of 50 to 64-year old women. The average age of volunteers taking part in this study was 50.51 ± 10.63, and corresponded to the climacteric period representing a predisposing factor for UI due to the reduction of estrogen and the significant density of estrogen receptors in the urethra and in the bladder neck. Based on a population survey performed in the city of Campinas, Guarisi et al. (40) observed that 35% of climacteric women had SUI. Due to demographic changes in population, post-menopausal women will comprise a large portion of population in a near future. These women lead active lives, working, traveling, practicing sports and physical activities, and urinary dysfunction represents a significant and substantial impairment in their quality of life and daily activities (DA) (41, 42).
Table 4 - Frequency of medical discharge and surgery in both groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters assessed</th>
<th>Group MF (Yes)</th>
<th>Group MF (No)</th>
<th>Group M (Yes)</th>
<th>Group M (No)</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical discharge</td>
<td>60.60% (20)</td>
<td>39.40% (13)</td>
<td>18.75% (6)</td>
<td>78.78% (26)</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgery</td>
<td>30.30% (10)</td>
<td>69.70% (23)</td>
<td>81.2% (26)</td>
<td>18.18% (6)</td>
<td>0.00004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 - Parameters assessed after the physical therapy treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters assessed</th>
<th>Group MF (Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain of strength in the pelvic floor</td>
<td>60.6% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased urinary frequency</td>
<td>27.3% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease/no nocturia</td>
<td>45.5% (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usually the Literature (4, 9, 42-44) considers SUI to be the more prevalent type of incontinence among women, varying between 12% and 56%. However, most studies have their diagnosis based on clinical complaints. According to Table 1, there was higher prevalence of SUI in both groups. The factors related to dysfunctions in the pelvic floor are obesity, chronic bronchitis, vaginal births, multiparity, age, and changes in collagen (44). One can notice the high prevalence of pregnancy and vaginal births among the volunteers (Table 2), which can be one of the causes for the SUI, as according to Haphpeykar et al. (45) pregnancy and natural births are predisposing factors for the occurrence of SUI. Studies point out that women developing postpartum SUI are likely to develop it again within a twelve-year period (46, 47).

Sexual complaints occurred in both groups; however, they were more present in group MF (Table 3). According to Kaiser et al. (48), organic, psychosocial and situational changes may influence women’s sexuality. The occurrence of diseases affecting genital or pelvic organs caused by aging, vaginal atrophy, decreased pelvic floor tropism, decreased lubrication and prior surgeries also decrease sexual desire (49).

Both groups had patients who had previously undergone surgeries to correct UI and in face of the persistence of its symptoms sought medical care again. The surgical correction is a costly process that can bring other symptoms and reduce one’s activities, requiring rest. In addition, it can also cause complications and morbidity and may not always satisfactorily cure UI. According to reports from relapsing patients, surgery would only be considered when all conservative options have already been performed with no success or when patients refuse undergoing clinical treatment (50). Currently, physiotherapy is considered a first-line treatment for UI providing beneficial results for being conservative, minimally invasive, having low rate of side effects, in addition to its low cost (51). The Pelvic Floor Assessment Group of the International Continence Society (ICS) published an article stating that urgency, frequency, OB and SUI are symptoms of dysfunctions in the pelvic floor muscles and that its treatment should be performed together with the bladder retraining by a qualified Physiotherapist (52).

By the physical therapy treatment, it was possible to prevent surgery in 60% of cases (Table 4) using resources such as perennial exercise, biofeedback, vaginal cones, electro stimulation and bladder retraining according to the clinical complaints and results from the urodynamic study. The lower percentage of surgery in women from group MF shows that there are other treatment options that should be taken into account and made available to patients with UI. Results found on gain of strength, decreased urinary frequency and nocturia show the effectiveness of the physical therapy treatment (Table 5).

Studies point out that perennial exercise (53), whether isolated or together with EE (54), is effective in reducing urinary loss and retraining the proprioception of the urogenital area. In a test using ES, Herrmann et al. (51) observed that 77.2% patients did not have any losses when exerting by the therapy completion. Thus, one can conclude that ES is one useful therapeutic alternative for women with SUI. Capelini (55) observed that the learning provided by biofeedback, its training and the maintenance of exercises bring good results by reducing urinary loss from about 8.1 to 0.4 a day. García-Giralda et
al. (56) observed the effectiveness of the mixed UI therapy using medications to reduce overactive bladder together with a pelvic floor rehabilitation program. The use of ES can improve symptoms (33, 57, 58) up to 77% and may provide a 40% reduction in costs if performed instead of surgery.

Regardless of the technique employed, we found (Tables 5 and 6) a high success rate in this treatment, which provided data increasing the reliability of this therapy. It also showed that we must rethink about the physical and psychological conditions, which expose patients when priority is given to the surgery.

Despite all the encouraging data provided by this research, there is still much to do for urogynecological physiotherapy, as making patients aware of the importance of early treatment, and addressing the lack of motivation and adherence to the treatment as it does not produce immediate results. For it being a weekly treatment, many women quit it at the beginning, even before noticing any improvement in symptoms. The disclosure of and encouragement to this treatment option is essential to objectively improve the patients’ quality of life. One can also notice the need for early intervention before symptoms become evident and troublesome to the patient, by making women aware of the pelvic floor function and of the importance of daily performing perennial exercise.

This study also shows the need for new studies comparing and proving which physiotherapy methods are the most efficient for each urinary incontinence type.

**Conclusions**

We therefore conclude that the use of physiotherapy techniques in women with urinary incontinence is an efficient way to decrease the symptoms and the number of surgeries required.

**References**


