Perceptions of playing-related musculoskeletal disorders (PRMDs) in Irish traditional musicians. A focus group study


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Playing-related musculoskeletal disorders in Irish traditional musicians: a focus group study

Iset M Wilson, PhD., MSc., MCSP, MISCP1
Liz Doherty, PhD., BMus2
Laura McKeown, PhD., BSc(Hons)OT3

1: University of Ulster, Jordanstown and CHaRT (Centre for Health and Rehabilitation Technologies)
2: University of Ulster, Magee and Arts and Humanities Research Institute
3: University of Ulster, Jordanstown

Background

Between 32% and 87% of musicians have playing-related musculoskeletal problems (PRMDs) 
Most research has investigated PRMDs in classical musicians 
Conflict in the literature (classical v folk): 
- There are similar patterns of injury when comparing classical and folk musicians [1] 
- Previous work found differences between classical and folk [2] and [3] in Irish traditional musicians 
- There has been very little research into Irish traditional musicians 

To date:
- The pattern of injuries for classical musicians is different to those who play traditional music [2] 
- PRMDs are a significant problem and can cause neurological abnormalities [3] 
- PRMDs are a problem for traditional Irish musicians and there is a culture of silence and stigmatisation [4]

This is the first study to explore the Irish traditional musician’s perceptions of PRMDs

Methods

Focus groups (n = 4) in 2011 and 2012
Derry and Limrick
Ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee, University of Ulster
Inclusion criteria: 
- Makes or females aged 18 and above 
- Who taught or played Irish traditional music on any instrument

Participants: (n = 22)
- Students 
- Teachers 
- Performers 
- University lecturer 
- Nine engaged in more than one way (performing, teaching, writing, music therapy)

Played: 8 to 40 years

Instruments played by participants

Results

Participants: (n = 22)
- Students 
- Teachers 
- Performers 
- University lecturer 
- Nine engaged in more than one way (performing, teaching, writing, music therapy)

PRMDs: where they were...

Fear: sub-theme distrust of health professionals

Several participants commented on the lack of specialist knowledge of health professionals 
Participants believe:
- Health professionals do not understand the unique needs of a musician, and especially, the traditional musician 
- Health professionals will tell them to stop playing 
- An intervention could do more harm than good 
- There are no clearly identified health professionals that specialise in PRMDs 
- There is a lack of support for musicians with PRMDs

Stresses contributing to PRMDs

Physical

Playing environment
- Setting is not designed for performance (often pub, bars) 
- Playing often happens at night, and can last for several hours (especially sessions)
- Although the setting may be unsuitable, there is a reluctance to disturb the session or draw attention to themselves and thus away from the music by asking for more space or bringing up the issue to everyone's attention

"You could be squeezed into a corner of a pub and you do find that it is strenuous across the basics." 

(Participant 11)

Postural issues
- Poor unsuitable seating and insufficient space 
- Postural problems are recognized, but not acted upon during the session
- Some musicians found the Alexander technique very useful
- Identity of being an Irish traditional musician does not include warm-ups and other exercises

"You’re just sitting in weird positions and in weird chairs."

(Participant 13)

The instrument
- Qualitatively and physical size of the instrument was relevant to PRMDs 
- Lesser quality and heavier instruments were more likely to cause PRMDs
- Musicians alter their instruments to reduce PRMDs

The way music is taught 
- Technical precision 
- Manual dexterity 
- Endurance 
- Postural stresses 
- Psychosocial issues and stresses within their culture that were relevant to PRMDs

"It’s learnt that it’s learnt that it’s learnt that it’s learnt that they don’t want to alter their habits that they have to stop.

(Participant 11)

The way music is taught 
- The way music is taught differently to classical 
- Traditional music is taught differently to classical

"You have to play it as your teacher taught you."

(Participant 8)

"It’s just a different way of playing."

(Participant 17)

PRMDs: how they are described...

Neck:
- Pain
- Weakness
- Stiffness
- Aching
- Tension
- Tingling
- pins and needles

Fear: sub-theme avoidance

"I think there is this massive fear of having to give it up, and that’s what it is, there’s a block there that you know that – you know you go to somebody that they might tell you to stop playing for 3 or 4 months and for people who are playing professionally it is a lot of issues they can’t afford to do that because they’re still thinking about or even classically music?"

(Participant 7)

Only 5 of the 22 participants did not currently have a PRMD

PRMDs were considered less important than the music and the whole musical experience

"You're just sitting in weird positions and in weird chairs."

(Participant 13)

Fear

There is massive fear of having to give it up, and that’s what it is, there’s a block there that you know that – you know you go to somebody that they might tell you to stop playing for 3 or 4 months and for people who are playing professionally it is a lot of issues they can’t afford to do that because they’re still thinking about or even classically music?

(Participant 7)

"You’re just sitting in weird positions and in weird chairs."

(Participant 13)

Stresses contributing to PRMDs

Emotional/psychological

Higher risk of PRMDs if musician is:
- Nervous
- Anxious
- Tense
- Stressed

Management includes trying to relax

Discussion

In order to be successful, musicians must have:
- Physical and mental strength
- Endurance
- Manual dexterity
- Ability to play repetitively and rapidly, day after day, and year after year [5, 6]

A successful musician and a successful athlete, will each have these same qualities.

Why is there such discrepancy in the management of their injuries?

All participants either had one or more PRMD or knew of someone with a PRMD

Irish traditional musicians consider themselves, their music and their musical culture as different to other musicians e.g. classical

Despite being aware of problems such as sitting etc., participating in music was more important than their pain and discomfort

Take home messages

Irish traditional musicians identified specific issues and stresses within their culture that were associated with PRMDs

Not all musicians are the same – there are different musical cultures as well as different music and playing environments

Health professionals must understand the musculoskeletal and performance demands of each musician, in order to provide help

References


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