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Regionally based medical practitioners may need support when prescribing exercise to pregnant women

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I state that the contents are the authors' original work and that the paper has not been submitted for publication to another journal.

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Regionally-based medical practitioners may need support when prescribing exercise to pregnant women.

Introduction: Physical activity (PA) undertaken in accordance with exercise during pregnancy guidelines is associated with a variety of health benefits.[1] Despite these health benefits, very few women are sufficiently active during pregnancy.[1] International research suggests that medical practitioners (MP) play a vital role in assisting women to exercise during pregnancy, with exercise counselling by MPs found to be effective and feasible in increasing PA levels in pregnant women.[2]

An increase in visits to MPs during pregnancy places MPs in a unique position to offer consistent PA/exercise counselling and support.[2] Specifically, pregnant women see their MP up to 11 times over the course of an uncomplicated pregnancy,[2] compared to the general population who see their MP at least once a year.[3] Furthermore, MP advice is a powerful motivator to increase PA levels because of the MPs perceived credibility and authority[4], especially among pregnant women who may consider pregnancy as the opportune time to implement healthy lifestyle changes. However, previous research suggests MPs may not be promoting exercise in accordance with recommended guidelines, or utilising screening tools to assist in the exercise prescription process.

International research also suggests that MPs receive no formal training in exercise prescription for pregnant women and that many MPs lack confidence in their exercise counselling abilities and knowledge.[2] However, no study to date has

examined these factors in an Australian context. The importance of having MPs provide PA/exercise advice is amplified in rural, remote and regional Australia where PA levels are lowest, and access to specialist healthcare services, such as antenatal care, is less accessible than in urban Australia.[5] These factors place individuals living in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia at increased health risk.[5] Thus, interventions that aim to increase PA through MP counselling are warranted. To inform intervention development, insight into what MPs currently know about exercise during pregnancy is needed. The current study aimed to examine the level of awareness of exercise during pregnancy guidelines and associated screening tools, training received, and degree of confidence in offering exercise prescription to pregnant women in a sample of MPs based in Rockhampton, Australia. This study was approved by the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (H13/06-123).

Participants, Methods & Results: All GPs in Rockhampton (n=80-90) were invited to participate in a survey exploring level of awareness of exercise during pregnancy guidelines and associated screening tools, what training MPs received in exercise prescription for pregnant women, and MPs confidence in prescribing exercise to pregnant women. Of these, 50 responded (response rate 55-62%). Most participants were female (58%), aged 25-34yrs (40%) and practicing less than 5 years (40%). Only 8% were familiar with exercise during pregnancy guidelines and none were familiar with screening tools. Only 4% of MP's had received formal training in exercise prescription while 42% were confident in providing exercise advice to pregnant women. Results are further illustrated in Table 1.

Comment: The present findings suggest Rockhampton-based MPs in Australia have insufficient awareness of exercise during pregnancy guidelines and associated screening tools, receive very little formal training in prescribing exercise to pregnant women and lack confidence in providing exercise prescription to pregnant women. There are obvious advantages to having MPs offer exercise advice to pregnant women, especially in a regional setting where access to specialist services may be limited. To do this, MPs need to be equipped with the necessary training and ongoing support to provide effective exercise prescription to pregnant women. Future studies

using nationally representative samples are needed to better inform both policy and practice.

KEY WORDS: Physical activity, exercise, pregnancy, maternal health, primary care

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

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Table 1. Training, awareness and confidence in providing exercise advice to pregnant women.

Question	Response n (%)	
	Yes	No
Have you received any formal training on exercise during pregnancy?	2 (4)	48 (96)*
Are you familiar with any exercise during pregnancy guidelines?	4 (8)	46 (92)*
Are you familiar with any screening tools that help to prescribe exercise among pregnant women?	0 (0)	50 (100)*
Are you confident in providing exercise advice to your pregnant patients?	21 (42)	29 (58)

* Significance ($p<0.05$)