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Informing the Practice of Respiratory Therapists

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Commentary

Enhancing scholarly practice in respiratory therapy: A call for professional evolution

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The respiratory therapy (RT) profession plays a vital role in modern healthcare, providing essential services to patients with acute and chronic cardiopulmonary conditions. To ensure that RTs have access to the latest evidence-based practices, there is a continuous need to both expand research, and disseminate this new knowledge, on key issues within the RT profession. The newly established Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapy (CSRT) grant program (https://www.csrt.com/research-grant-program/) is designed to support research initiatives that align with the priorities of the Canadian RT profession, ultimately enhancing patient care, family support, and professional development. The recent publication titled *The Scholarly and Practice Profile of Respiratory Therapists in Canada* by Zaccagnini et al. (2024) exemplifies the impact of the CSRT grant program, as the authors conducted a national cross-sectional study to assess the practice and scholarly profile of the RT profession, which was supported by the CSRT grant.[1] Their findings highlight significant challenges within the profession, particularly regarding scholarly practice. The survey's findings highlight a pressing need to enhance the scholarly competencies of RTs, which could be pivotal for advancing the profession's credibility and effectiveness.

One of the most striking findings from the survey is the low response rate of 6.8% despite multiple recruitment efforts. This raises concerns about the engagement levels within the profession. Such a response rate not only reflects a potential lack of interest in scholarly activities but also underscores the need for improving engagement within the professional community. Furthermore, the data revealed that while nearly 40% of respondents had completed an undergraduate degree beyond their respiratory therapy diploma, very few had authored or co-authored peer-reviewed publications, and the average RT reported reading only 2.2 peer-reviewed articles per month.[1] These findings suggest a limited engagement with the broader scientific community and a possible gap in the integration of evidence-based practice within the profession. This gap in scholarly practice is not merely an academic concern—it has real implications for patient care. As healthcare providers on the front lines, RTs must rely on the most current scientific evidence to make informed decisions and advocate effectively for their patients. This enables them to contribute meaningfully to interprofessional teams. The survey findings, where 78% of RTs agreed that understanding research enables them to engage in patient advocacy, highlight the critical intersection between scholarly practice and patient outcomes. Without robust engagement in scholarly activities, RTs risk falling behind in their ability to provide cutting-edge care and fully participate in the collaborative healthcare environment.

Given the importance of scholarly practice in ensuring high-quality patient care, there has been ongoing debate about raising the entry-to-practice qualification from a diploma to a bachelor's degree.[2,3] Such a shift could provide RTs with a broader education, which includes essential training in research methodologies, critical appraisal of evidence, and the application of research findings in clinical practice. Emerging evidence suggests that RTs with higher levels of education tend to achieve better patient outcomes.[4] Such educational enhancement is essential for equipping RTs with the skills necessary to contribute to the advancement of their field and improve patient outcomes. Some RTs have sought research and evaluation skills outside of the profession, earning designations such as Certified Research Professional (CRP) or pursuing advanced degrees (e.g., Master's or doctorate) in other subjects. However, these opportunities do not currently exist within the faculties that teach respiratory therapy. This highlights the disconnect between the competencies needed for advanced practice and those provided within the standard respiratory therapy curriculum. The absence of consistent research and evaluation training in RT education not only limits the profession's ability to generate new knowledge from within, but also may affect its standing within interprofessional teams.

The survey findings underscore the necessity of creating supportive environments that fosters scholarly practice. Over 93% of respondents agreed that a supportive work environment is essential for developing as a scholarly practitioner, reflecting a strong desire for support.[1] This support

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includes access to resources such as funding opportunities, protected time for research, and professional development activities. The CSRT grant program is one initiative aimed at fostering these conditions. Investing in more of these areas could empower RTs to engage more actively with research, contribute to the evidence base of their field, and ultimately enhance the quality of care provided to patients. However, current staffing levels, budgetary constraints and competing priorities may continue to pose challenges to the widespread adoption of strategies that take practitioners away from the bedside, regardless of the potential for improvements in professional practice. Such barriers and potential solutions are likely another area worth empirically studying.

The results from Zaccagnini et al.'s survey underscore an urgent need for a cultural and structural shift within the RT profession.[1] Elevating the entry-to-practice qualification to a bachelor's degree, enhancing access to research training, and fostering a supportive scholarly environment are critical steps toward this goal. The future of RT practice in Canada hinges on the profession's ability to evolve and adapt to the demands of modern healthcare.[5] Embracing and enhancing scholarly practice is not just an aspirational goal—it is a necessity for ensuring that RTs can continue to provide exceptional care in an increasingly complex healthcare environment. The findings from this survey should serve as a wake-up call to the profession: the time to act is now. By investing in scholarly practice, the respiratory therapy profession can strive to secure its place as a leader in patient care, research, and interprofessional collaboration, ultimately benefiting patients across Canada. It is imperative that all interested parties—educational institutions, professional associations, regulatory bodies, and healthcare organizations—work together to create the conditions that will allow RTs to thrive as both clinicians and scholars. By doing so, we can ensure that RTs remain at the cutting edge of their field, providing the highest quality of care to those who need it most.

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