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COMMENTARY



The making of World Physiotherapy: leadership, diplomacy and the foundation of WCPT

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ABSTRACT

Background: The World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT), now World Physiotherapy, was founded in Copenhagen on September 8, 1951. Although its establishment is often portrayed as an inevitable consequence of post-Second World War international cooperation, recently examined archival material suggests a more complex history.

Purpose: To reflect on the foundation of WCPT on its seventy-fifth anniversary and consider the lessons its formation offers the contemporary physiotherapy profession.

Key themes: International collaboration among physiotherapists long predated WCPT. While there was broad agreement that an international organization was needed, there was considerable disagreement regarding its structure, governance and representation. The creation of WCPT emerged through sustained negotiation between competing organizational models and professional traditions. The leadership of figures including Mildred Elson, Muriel Neilson and André Nicolle was pivotal in navigating these differences and establishing an organization founded on cooperation rather than uniformity.

Conclusions: The history of WCPT demonstrates that enduring international organizations are built through diplomacy, compromise and shared purpose rather than unanimous agreement. Seventy-five years later, the circumstances surrounding its foundation remain relevant to contemporary discussions of professional leadership, governance and international collaboration.

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On September 8, 1951 delegates representing seventeen national physiotherapy associations met in Copenhagen to establish the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT), now World Physiotherapy (World Physiotherapy 2020). Seventy-five years later it represents more than 600,000 physiotherapists through 129 member organizations, and is the sole international voice of the profession (World Physiotherapy, 2026).

The creation of the WCPT is often portrayed as a natural consequence of the international optimism that followed the Second World War - a profession recognizing the benefits of cooperation and coming together around a common purpose (Crompton, 2001; Myers, 2006). The archival record suggests a more interesting story.

Recently examined correspondence, minutes, reports and personal accounts from several countries reveal that the creation of WCPT was neither straightforward nor inevitable (McMillan, 1952; Morice and Dupuis-Deltor, 1948; Nuijten, 1948; Van Oosten, 1951; WCPT, 1951). Behind the celebrations of the Copenhagen foundation lay competing organizations, conflicting visions of professional identity, disputes over governance, and moments when the entire project appeared close to

collapse. Yet these same documents reveal something equally significant. Despite profound disagreements, the leaders of the profession consistently prioritized the long-term interests of physiotherapy over national, organizational and personal ambitions.

As World Physiotherapy celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary, perhaps the greatest tribute to its founders is not simply to recount the events of 1951, but to reflect upon the qualities that made success possible.

International collaboration did not begin in 1951

One of the enduring myths surrounding the WCPT is that international physiotherapy collaboration began with its foundation. In reality, physiotherapists had been learning from one another across national borders a century before. During the mid-nineteenth century the spread of Swedish medical gymnastics established one of the profession's first international networks, with practitioners traveling throughout Europe and beyond to teach and study Ling's methods (Ottosson, 2015; Wanneberg, 2018). And from the turn of the twentieth century holders

of certificates of proficiency from the Society of Trained Masseuses migrated throughout the British Empire and beyond (Graham, 1940). Reciprocally, practitioners from across the world traveled to Europe to undertake advanced education in massage and medical gymnastics (Pettman, 2007; Wanneberg, 2018).

By the interwar period of the twentieth century these informal exchanges had become increasingly organized. Study tours, international congresses and professional visits were common. During the Second World War international collaboration intensified further as British and American physiotherapists worked together in military hospitals, creating professional relationships that would later prove pivotal (Cole, 1946).

The profession therefore entered the postwar period with an established culture of international exchange. The question was no longer whether physiotherapists should collaborate internationally, but how that collaboration should be organized.

Shared aspirations, competing visions

The archival evidence demonstrates remarkable agreement about one fundamental principle. Virtually every national association believed that physiotherapy needed an international organization. Agreement ended there (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 1948).

By the late 1940s a decade-old European organization – the International Federation of Physiotherapists (IFP) – already provided a framework for cooperation among several continental associations, including France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. At the same time, leaders within the American Physiotherapy Association and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy envisaged a broader global confederation representing one national association from each country, modelled on other international professional bodies, eg., International Nurses Association (Elson, 1948).

These were not simply competing organizations; they represented different philosophies. The IFP reflected European traditions, longstanding personal relationships and regional cooperation. The Anglo-American proposal reflected the postwar emergence of global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Both groups sought international collaboration, yet they differed fundamentally on how that collaboration should be structured (Morice and Dupuis-Deltor, 1948; Nuijten, 1948). At the provisional meeting of national physiotherapy associations in London in 1948, it was reported that.

All the other delegates who spoke were in favour of having an international organisation to represent physiotherapists though opinions were divided on whether it would be better to build on the existing organisation or to set up a new one.(Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 1948)

Importantly, neither side opposed international cooperation. The debate centered on legitimacy, representation and governance. Understanding this distinction changes our interpretation of WCPT's foundation. Rather than a struggle between progress and resistance, it was a negotiation between competing, yet equally sincere, visions of the profession's future.

Leadership proved decisive

Historical anniversaries often celebrate organizations while overlooking the individuals whose leadership shaped them. The foundation of WCPT reminds us how much institutions depend upon people.

Mildred Elson of the US and Muriel Neilson of the UK were particularly influential. Together they provided the strategic vision and organizational capacity that transformed an aspiration into reality. Their correspondence reveals extraordinary persistence over four years of negotiations, consultations and diplomatic engagement (Elson, 1950; Neilson, 1950).

Equally important was André Nicolle of France, whose role deserves greater recognition than it often receives. Representing the IFP, Nicolle consistently defended the interests of continental European physiotherapists while simultaneously serving on the provisional committee responsible for creating WCPT. His position required balancing loyalty to an existing organization with participation in constructing its potential successor – an inherently difficult task (Remondière, 2022).

The interactions between Elson, Neilson and Nicolle illustrate an important historical lesson. Effective leadership does not require agreement. Throughout the negotiations these individuals disagreed vigorously over organizational structures while maintaining sufficient mutual respect to continue working toward a common objective (Elson, 1951). That distinction remains relevant for professional organizations today.

The politics of professional identity

The debates leading to WCPT's foundation were about far more than administrative arrangements. Questions concerning membership, voting rights, language and organizational structure reflected deeper issues surrounding professional identity. Even the choice of the

name “World Confederation for Physical Therapy” rather than “Physiotherapy” highlighted differences in terminology that existed internationally and continue, to some extent, today (Ruscoe et al., 2024).

Similarly, debates surrounding the admission of member organizations reflected differing understandings of professional legitimacy. Should existing regional federations retain collective representation? Should there be only one recognized organization from each country? How should countries with competing national associations be accommodated? These were not procedural technicalities. They represented fundamental questions about what constituted the profession itself.

As she traveled to the foundation meeting, Elson (1963) reflected,

We approached the organisational meeting in 1951 with many fears and worries. Would we be able to achieve our objectives and unite the Physical Therapy Associations of the World into a Confederation? Would the differences between us in ideology, language, and culture be insurmountable?

Her worst fears were realized when, during the Copenhagen foundation meeting, disagreement over Belgian representation resulted in the withdrawal of the IFP and its five member associations from the proceedings (McMillan, 1952; Van Oosten, 1951; WCPT, 1951). At that moment the success of the entire enterprise appeared uncertain. That WCPT nevertheless emerged from these disputes is perhaps its founders’ greatest achievement.

Success through diplomacy rather than consensus

Looking back across seventy-five years, it is tempting to view WCPT’s subsequent growth as evidence that its creation was inevitable. History suggests otherwise.

The organization succeeded not because disagreement was absent, but because disagreement was managed constructively. Participants repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to compromise on secondary issues, like structure, governance, representation and even name, while remaining steadfast regarding the primary objective of establishing a genuinely international organization (Elson, 1951; Remondière, 2022). This distinction deserves greater recognition.

Modern professional organizations frequently confront differences in educational standards, scope of practice, terminology, regulation and healthcare systems. Such diversity is often viewed as an obstacle to international collaboration. The experience of WCPT’s

founders suggests the opposite. Diversity existed from the beginning. Indeed, it was precisely because national systems differed so substantially that an international forum became necessary. Perhaps the founders’ greatest contribution was recognizing that international unity did not require international uniformity.

A remarkable legacy

One further aspect of WCPT’s foundation deserves acknowledgment. Whilst women dominated the physiotherapy profession in the US, and the Commonwealth and Scandinavian nations, the leadership of the competing IFP was by contrast very masculine and were used to hierarchical models (Morice and Dupuis-Deltor, 1948; Nuijten, 1948). Furthermore, it was a time when returning servicemen were reestablishing their dominance in the workplace.

The confederation was established primarily through the leadership of an extraordinary group of women. Mildred Elson, Muriel Neilson, Winifred McAllister, Sybil Coleridge, Johanna de Haas, Rudie Agnersnap, Catherine Worthingham and many others exercised strategic, organizational and diplomatic leadership during an era when such opportunities were uncommon for women. Their achievement should not be viewed simply as a milestone in women’s professional history, although it undoubtedly was. More importantly, it reflected physiotherapy’s distinctive culture, in which leadership emerged from competence, commitment and service to the profession rather than traditional hierarchies. That culture helped shape the organization they created.

Looking forward by looking back

World Physiotherapy today operates in a vastly different environment from that of 1951. The profession has expanded enormously, health service delivery has become increasingly global, and communication technologies have transformed international collaboration. Yet many of the challenges confronting the organization remain surprisingly familiar. Any questions surrounding professional identity, educational standards, cultural diversity, representation and governance demand thoughtful leadership.

The story of WCPT’s foundation therefore offers more than historical interest. It reminds us that enduring institutions are seldom created through unanimous agreement. Rather, they emerge through patient negotiation, mutual respect and a willingness to place collective aspirations above individual preferences.

Seventy-five years ago the founders of WCPT demonstrated that physiotherapists from different

nations, cultures and professional traditions could build something together that none could achieve alone. Their greatest legacy was not simply the establishment of an international organization. It was the creation of a culture of collaboration that has continued to strengthen the profession for three-quarters of a century. As World Physiotherapy enters its next seventy-five years, that may be the most valuable lesson its history has to offer.

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For a detailed historical reconstruction of the foundation of the WCPT, from which this commentary is drawn, see the full version on the International Physiotherapy History Association's website at <https://history.physio/exhibitions/world-physiotherapy/>

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