The Status of Korean Rehabilitation Medicine & Vision

The root of physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) in South Korea can be traced back to 1951, with the establishment of the American-Korean Foundation. The Korean National Rehabilitation Center was founded in 1953 with the support of the United Nations and the American-Korean Foundation.

The Korean Academy of Rehabilitation Medicine (KARM) was founded in 1972. KARM’s function includes services that are similarly provided by both the American Academy of PM&R and the American Board of PM&R. KARM is a membership organization that coordinates national meetings and educational programs. KARM holds academic conferences in spring and autumn every year and also participates in social and political issues that concern the welfare and human rights of those with disabilities in Korea.

The official recognition of PM&R as a medical specialty in 1982 provided a great momentum to its growth. Medical student education was introduced in 6 medical schools, and residency training programs were initiated in 8 hospitals in the following year. The First board examination was held in that same year. Since then PM&R has expanded rapidly nationwide and currently 83 training hospitals provide PM&R residency training programs throughout South Korea. As of 2015, a total of 1858 physiatrists have been board certified in South Korea.

The official journal of KARM, Annals of Rehabilitation Medicine, which is indexed on Scopus, is published in English every other month. Fourteen branch or subspecialty academies are also evolving, such as the Korean Society for NeuroRehabilitation, the Korean Society of Pediatric Rehabilitation and Developmental Medicine, etc. In June 2007, 4th International Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine World Congress were held successfully in Seoul.

Nationwide Rehabilitation hospitals provide comprehensive rehabilitation in the patients with central nervous system diseases, peripheral nervous system diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, senile diseases, pediatric diseases, cancer, cardiac and lung disorders.

Most physiatrists involved in academic activities carry out various researches, from molecular or genetic to translational studies or clinical trials. Research in diverse fields of PM&R is mostly funded by the Government and some universities or hospitals provide funding to their own faculties.

Recently, the number of people with disabilities has increased rapidly, the number with disabilities registered in Korea reaching 5 percent of the total population. It has become a social problem requiring more PM&R services. Recent advancement in medical engineering technologies such as robotic rehabilitation, virtual reality, and telemedicine provides a strong underpinning for the growth of the rehabilitation industry.

Prompted by a concern about insufficient rehabilitation service delivery systems in South Korea, the government has established 6 regional rehabilitation centers that provide comprehensive and systematic rehabilitation services in cooperation with the Korean National Rehabilitation Center. In addition, the community based rehabilitation (CBR) utilizes primary healthcare system that expands nationwide local public health centers.

National Rehabilitation Research Institute (KNRRI) opened on November, 2008 and functions as the first research center for people with disabilities in Korea. The purpose of KNRRI is to improve rehabilitation technologies and policies for people with disabilities.
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