Abstract #39812

The Role of Therapeutic Professionals and Tools for Assessing Therapeutic Progress in Rett Syndrome

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INTRODUCTION

- Rett syndrome (RTT) is a genetic neurological and developmental disorder that predominantly affects females. RTT is a rare condition, with an estimated incidence of 1 in 10,000 female births.[1]
- RTT is characterized by normal early development followed by regression beginning around 12–18 months of age.[2] The symptoms of RTT are debilitating and affect multiple organ systems, ranging from loss of mobility to epilepsy and abnormal breathing.[1,3] Patients with RTT usually require round-the-clock care.[2]
- Therapeutic professionals (TPs) play a key role in day-to-day symptom management for patients with RTT.[4,5]

OBJECTIVES

- This study aimed to describe the care pathway for RTT in the United States, particularly the role of TPs, and to identify the tools that TPs use for assessment of progress in patients with RTT.

METHODS

- A series of semi-structured interviews with TPs (physical therapists [PT], occupational therapists [OT], and speech and language therapists [ST]) and clinicians who treat patients with RTT (and may refer them to TPs) were conducted.
- To maintain impartiality of the collected evidence, all interviews were conducted in a double-blinded fashion.
- The target sample aimed to include 20–25 TPs and 8–10 referring clinicians and provide a good representation of different care settings (RTT Centers of Excellence [COEs], non-COE outpatient and home health, and school-based care).
- Participants (both TPs and clinicians) were required to practice in the US and have >3 and <25 years experience in their role.

RESULTS

Participant characteristics

- Twenty-six healthcare professionals were interviewed, including 17 TPs (6 PT, 6 OT, 5 ST), and 9 clinicians (3 pediatricians and 6 pediatric neurologists).
- The TPs worked in community-based (n=10), school-based (n=5), and other (n=2) settings.

Evolution of RTT care pathway over the patient's lifetime

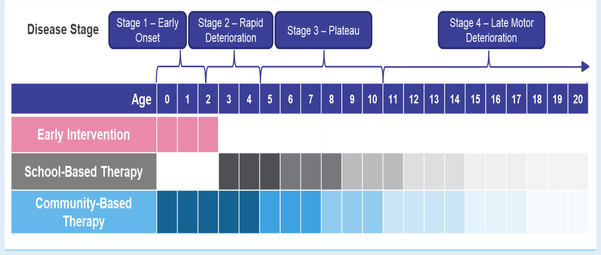
- The care pathway for patients with RTT was found to be largely driven by disease stage, age and symptoms experienced by the patient, with evolving needs for ongoing therapy services in later disease stages (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. The Changing Needs of Patients with RTT

RTT Stage	Common Symptoms and Therapy Focus
Stage 1 – Early Onset *Ages: ~6-18 months*	• Developmental delays in sitting and crawling • Loss of interest in toys • Less eye contact • Early Interventions services focus on parental training and support
Stage 2 – Rapid Deterioration *Ages: ~1-4 years*	• Loss of previous skills (such as sitting, standing, walking, and self-feeding) • Rapid onset of RTT symptoms (such as slowed head growth, abnormal hand movements, communication challenges) • Therapy services focus on parental training and minimizing functional deterioration
Stage 3 – Plateau *Ages: ~5-10 years*	• Mobility problems persist • Hand use and communication improve • Seizures often present • Therapy services focus on optimizing function and prevention of regression in latter stage
Stage 4 – Late Motor Deterioration *Ages: ~10+ years*	• Progressive decline in muscle strength and control resulting in decreased mobility • Communication and hand skills remain stable • Seizures may lessen • Need for therapy continues to address long-term optimal functional maintenance but may be subject to more barriers from payers

- Consistent with the changing needs of patients with RTT, the care pathway could be divided into three phases (**Figure 2**):
  1. Early intervention services that aim to improve functional skills through parental training and terminate at the age of 3.
  2. School-based therapy, focused on enabling access to education and integration in school, begins at the age of 3 and may continue over the child's education.
  3. Community-based therapy to support functioning at home and in the community may continue over the patient's lifetime, but usually tends to decline by age 5–10.

Figure 2. Therapy Continuum for Patients with RTT



Key stakeholders involved in the RTT care pathway

- Optimal treatment for patients with RTT was found to utilize a multidisciplinary care team approach in which TPs are integral:
  - **Community-based TPs** provide frontline support for patients, focused on functional mobility and contracture prevention (PT), participation in activities of daily living (OT), and addressing communication problems and dysphagia (ST).
  - **School-based TPs** act as educational enablers, addressing functional mobility (PT), fine motor skills (OT), and supporting communication and socialization at school (ST).
  - **Pediatricians and pediatric neurologists** act as care team leaders and decision makers.
  - **Other medical specialists** who support the patient and family. Gastroenterology, orthopedics, and endocrinology support is commonly needed to help manage symptoms such as scoliosis, dysphagia, and osteopenia. Other specialties may also be engaged depending on patient's symptoms and needs.
- Notable differences in the organization of care and stakeholder engagement were found between COE and non-COE settings:
  - COEs foster an integrated care model that facilitates access to care and coordination of services for patients with RTT, potentially also reducing caregiver burden.
  - Outside of COEs, care is more compartmentalized, which could require greater effort from caregivers to facilitate coordination.
- Identified areas for improvement of care organization outside of the COE setting included geographic accessibility, disease-specific experience, integration of care plan, communication across the care team, and support for caregivers.

Limitations of the RTT care pathway and efforts for improvement

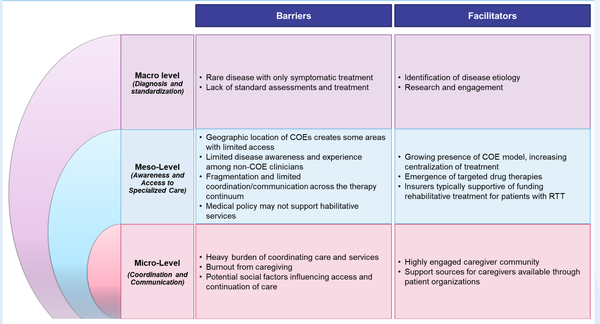
- Inherent limitations in coordination of care, communication, and standardization were identified in the RTT care continuum, creating potential barriers to access for patients (**Table 1**). In particular, reimbursement and access issues were identified as important barriers to optimal provision of early intervention and community care, while school-based care was less affected, being funded by the school district.
- Barriers to optimal provision of care for patients with RTT were identified at every level. Notable challenges included limited experience with the RTT population and fragmentation of care potentially delaying referral to TPs, an issue which COEs may be empowered to mitigate (**Figure 3**).
- Several factors that facilitate the efforts to improve the care pathway were also evident, including a very engaged caregiver community and growing centralization of care with the adoption of the COE model (**Figure 3**).

Table 1. Characteristics and limitations of the RTT care continuum

	Early Intervention	School-Based Therapy	Community-Based Therapy
Goals of Treatment	• Addresses early functional skills, such as crawling, walking, talking, eating	• Access to education and integration into neurotypical classrooms	• Functional activities to support home and limited community function
Eligibility and Referral	• Physician diagnosis of developmental delay or disability, and referral to therapy	• Standard criteria of disability limiting access to education	• Physician referral for services based on symptoms and patient/family needs
Payment / Reimbursement	• Health insurance OR • Sliding scale available for those who private pay	• Services paid for by school district • No OOP costs to family	• Health insurance or private pay • Some OOP costs to family • Insurance may have visit limits • Request for additional therapy approval may be screened by AI
Characteristics	• One-to-one sessions with much of therapist time focused on parental training	• Integrated into school day • Limited burden on parents for delivery of services • Focused only on academic needs	• Intensive, one-to-one therapy • Driven by patient/family goals for home function
Limitations	• High demand for services – there may be a waiting list and/or limited availability of services	• Often takes place in a group setting • Frequency and intensity may be lacking	• Logistic burden on parents to get patient to clinic • High demand for services with a possible waiting list

Abbreviations: AI, artificial intelligence; OOP, out-of-pocket.

Figure 3. Barriers and Facilitators to Optimal Care Provision



Abbreviations: COE, center of excellence.

Therapeutic assessment tools used by TPs in patients with RTT

- Assessment tools were commonly used across the therapy continuum to inform treatment goals, treatment modalities, and discharge planning. Generally, assessments were completed at initial evaluation and every 3 months thereafter, followed by a reassessment at discharge.
- TPs tended to use assessment tools that are most relevant to their discipline, although some tools appeared to lend themselves to multiple disciplines.
- Overall, TPs reported the use of 22 assessment tools, including 6 RTT-specific tools (3 assessing global function and 3 focused on PT/OT competencies, i.e., mobility and motor function). Tools unspecific to RTT (n=16) were used to measure global function (n=4), activities of daily living (n=6), and cognition, communication, and psychosocial functioning (n=6).
- Both TPs and physicians reported generally low awareness of RTT-specific assessment tools, and some respondents expressed an opinion that such tools are only appropriate for clinical trials and not everyday clinical practice.
- Access to some tools was limited due to permission and/or licensing requirements creating administrative barriers, and due to the prohibitive costs of using some of the tools.
- Integration into the workflow and embedding the assessment tools into electronic medical records were identified as possible barriers to adoption of assessment tools in clinical practice.

CONCLUSIONS

- Outside of the limited number of COEs, patients with RTT face barriers to optimal care provision by TPs, arising largely from lack of integrated, standardized care by RTT specialists familiar with this rare condition.
- Reimbursement and access issues may prohibit patients with RTT from accessing early intervention and community-based therapeutic services.
- Overall, TPs, who play a key role in day-to-day care for patients with RTT treated within COEs, are currently underutilized outside of the COE setting. This is likely driven by lack of standardized assessment of patient's therapeutic progress and response to treatment, insufficient integration of care, and limited access to care provided by TPs.
- Ongoing efforts to optimize the care pathway for patients with RTT and a growing adoption of the COE model with a strong engagement of TPs may lead to improved clinical outcomes and quality of life for patients with RTT and lessening the burden on their caregivers.
- TPs utilize a wide range of tools for assessing therapeutic progress in patients with RTT. These are often not RTT specific measures, but rather measures specific to the TPs' discipline or general pediatric disability.
- RTT is a rare disease and few clinical practice guidelines are available to guide real-world decision making. This represents a considerable evidence gap. More standardized and consistent assessment by TPs, and its regular review by clinicians, may allow for greater understanding of patient's therapeutic progress or response to treatment and facilitate therapeutic goal setting.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Medical writing and editorial assistance with the preparation of this poster was provided by Karolina Badora, PhD of Maple Health Group LLC, NY.

DISCLOSURES

DM is an employee and stockholder of Acadia Pharmaceuticals. CBA and SD are employees of Beacon, Part of Accenture, which received funding from Acadia Pharmaceuticals to conduct this study. BGC is a former employee of the Kennedy Krieger Institute and has served as a consultant for Acadia Pharmaceuticals. EC and CSH are employees of the Kennedy Krieger Institute and have received a research grant from Acadia Pharmaceuticals.

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