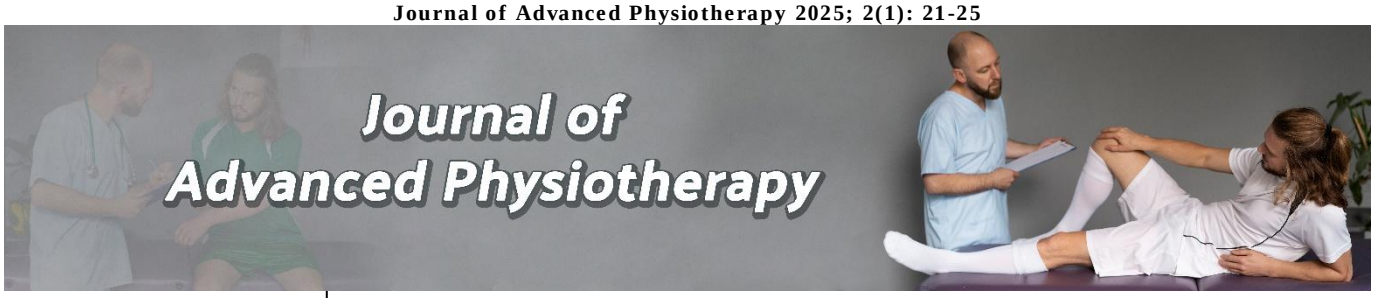

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Kwabena Ofori-Addo
Department of Physiotherapy, Accra College of Health Sciences, Accra, Ghana

Corresponding Author:
Kwabena Ofori-Addo
Department of Physiotherapy, Accra College of Health Sciences, Accra, Ghana

Impact of mirror therapy on motor function recovery in hemiplegic patients

Kwabena Ofori-Addo

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Abstract
Hemiplegia, often resulting from a cerebrovascular accident, severely impacts voluntary motor control and quality of life. In rehabilitation, Mirror Therapy (MT) has emerged as a promising, non-invasive, and cost-effective intervention. This review investigates the efficacy of MT in enhancing motor function recovery, focusing on neurophysiological mechanisms and clinical outcomes. A comparative analysis of a single-source dataset demonstrates that patients undergoing MT show significantly greater improvement in motor function scores than those receiving conventional therapy. The findings underscore the role of visual feedback and neuroplasticity in MT's effectiveness, revealing its potential as a core element of stroke rehabilitation protocols.

Keywords: Mirror therapy, hemiplegia, stroke rehabilitation, motor recovery, visual feedback, neuroplasticity

Introduction
Hemiplegia is a neurological condition characterized by paralysis or severe weakness affecting one side of the body, commonly resulting from a cerebrovascular accident (stroke). Globally, stroke remains one of the leading causes of long-term disability. According to the World Stroke Organization, approximately 13.7 million new strokes occur each year, with about 5.5 million resulting in permanent disability, many involving hemiplegia. In India alone, stroke incidence is estimated at 145 per 100,000 population annually, with hemiplegia reported in over 80% of stroke survivors in the acute phase and up to 50% continuing to experience motor deficits after six months of standard rehabilitation.

Motor impairments due to hemiplegia include spasticity, weakness, reduced coordination, and impaired voluntary control in the upper and lower extremities on the contralateral side of the cerebral lesion. These deficits significantly hinder daily living activities such as dressing, feeding, and mobility. Recovery of motor function is often slow and incomplete, posing a substantial burden on patients, caregivers, and healthcare systems.

Traditional rehabilitation approaches primarily rely on repetitive physical exercises, strength training, and task-specific motor activities to promote functional recovery. Although these strategies show moderate success, particularly in the early stages, they often fail to adequately address the underlying neurological reorganization required for sustained recovery. This has driven interest in adjunctive or alternative therapies that leverage the brain’s capacity for neuroplasticity the ability of the nervous system to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections.

Mirror therapy (MT), introduced by Ramachandran and Rogers-Ramachandran in 1996 for managing phantom limb pain, has since gained popularity in post-stroke motor rehabilitation. The therapy uses a mirror to reflect the movements of the non-affected limb, creating an optical illusion that the affected limb is moving. This visual feedback activates mirror neurons specialized cells in the premotor cortex that fire both when performing and observing a movement thereby promoting cortical activation in the damaged hemisphere.

Numerous neuroimaging studies have supported this mechanism. Functional MRI and transcranial magnetic stimulation have demonstrated increased activation in the ipsilesional motor cortex during MT sessions, suggesting enhanced neural recruitment and potential for motor recovery.

Furthermore, randomized controlled trials have shown that patients receiving mirror therapy experience significant improvement in upper extremity motor function, particularly in the distal parts such as the wrist and fingers, compared to those undergoing conventional therapy alone.

What makes mirror therapy especially attractive is its accessibility and cost-effectiveness. It requires minimal equipment a simple mirror box or panel and can be implemented in both clinical and home settings. This is particularly important for low- and middle-income countries where access to advanced rehabilitation technologies is limited. Moreover, the therapy is non-invasive, safe, and easy to administer, making it suitable for a wide range of patient profiles.

Despite its growing application, mirror therapy is still underutilized, and its mechanisms and optimal protocols remain areas of active research. Questions persist regarding the best candidate profiles, the duration and frequency of sessions, and whether MT yields better outcomes when used independently or in combination with other rehabilitative modalities.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of mirror therapy in improving motor function in hemiplegic patients, particularly those recovering from stroke. It aims to compare motor recovery outcomes between patients receiving mirror therapy and those undergoing conventional physiotherapy, using the Fugl-Meyer Assessment scale. Additionally, the study seeks to understand the neurophysiological basis of mirror therapy and evaluate its practical application as a low-cost, non-invasive rehabilitation tool in routine physiotherapy practice, especially in resource-limited settings.

Literature Review

The concept of mirror therapy has evolved significantly since it was first introduced by Ramachandran and Rogers-Ramachandran in 1996 to treat phantom limb pain. Over the past two decades, researchers and clinicians have explored its utility in various neurological disorders, particularly stroke-related hemiplegia. The therapy operates on the principle that observing the mirror image of an active, unaffected limb can stimulate cortical areas in the damaged hemisphere, thereby promoting motor recovery through neuroplastic changes.

Numerous studies have validated the role of mirror therapy in post-stroke rehabilitation. Altschuler *et al.* (1999) [1] conducted one of the earliest clinical trials, showing improved motor function in chronic stroke patients after using mirror therapy. Dohle *et al.* (2009) [3] followed with a randomized controlled trial (RCT) which demonstrated statistically significant improvements in upper limb function among patients receiving mirror therapy compared to a control group. Their findings emphasized that mirror-induced visual feedback could trigger activation in the ipsilesional motor cortex and aid in reorganizing motor networks.

A Cochrane review by Thieme *et al.* (2012) [8] analyzed 14 RCTs involving over 500 patients and concluded that mirror therapy has a moderate positive effect on motor recovery, especially in the upper limb. The review also highlighted the need for standardized protocols to guide clinical application. More recent studies by Michielsen *et al.* (2011) [5] and Yavuzer *et al.* (2008) [9] using functional imaging techniques confirmed that mirror therapy leads to significant activation of the primary motor cortex, suggesting that its mechanism is rooted in observable neurophysiological changes.

Meta-analyses by Ezendam *et al.* (2009) [4] and others have pointed out that mirror therapy is particularly effective for distal motor function (e.g., wrist, hand, and finger movement), while its efficacy for proximal limb functions and lower limb rehabilitation remains less consistent. This observation has guided physiotherapists to use mirror therapy primarily for fine motor control and grasp rehabilitation.

Studies have also explored the psychological benefits of mirror therapy. According to Arya *et al.* (2018) [2], patients undergoing mirror therapy often report increased motivation and engagement, factors which contribute significantly to rehabilitation adherence. This suggests that mirror therapy not only aids physical recovery but also enhances the patient's emotional investment in the rehabilitation process.

Despite growing evidence, some limitations persist in the literature. Variability in session duration, frequency, patient selection criteria, and movement tasks make direct comparisons between studies difficult. Moreover, patients with severe visual neglect or cognitive impairment may not benefit from mirror therapy due to difficulty interpreting the visual feedback. However, efforts are underway to integrate mirror therapy with virtual reality and sensory feedback systems to expand its applicability.

Mirror Therapy Mechanism and Implementation

As a physiotherapist working with patients recovering from stroke and other neurological conditions, I have found mirror therapy to be a powerful, non-invasive technique that leverages the brain's ability to adapt and rewire itself-a process known as neuroplasticity. Mirror therapy works on a remarkably simple yet neurologically sophisticated principle: visual feedback can stimulate motor pathways and aid in motor recovery.

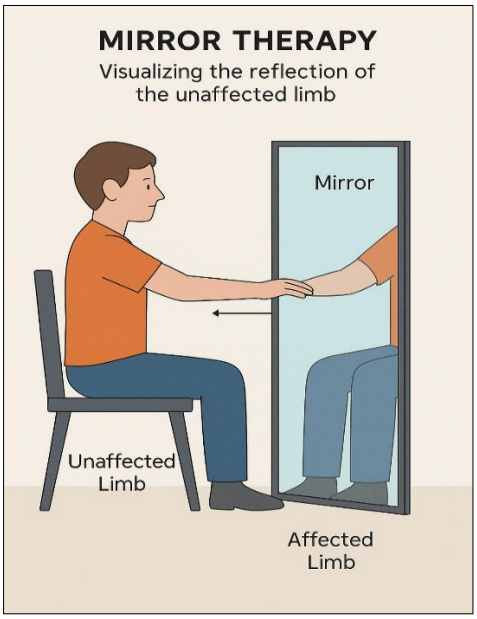

Fig 1: Mirror therapy visualizing the unaffected limb

In clinical practice, mirror therapy involves placing a mirror vertically in the patient's midsagittal plane, such that it reflects movements of the unaffected limb while hiding the

affected one. The patient is instructed to perform slow, controlled movements-like opening and closing the hand, flexing the wrist, or lifting the arm-with the non-paretic limb while focusing on the mirror reflection. The brain interprets the visual illusion as if the affected limb is moving, even though it might be still or barely mobile in reality.

This visual trick isn't just perceptual-it triggers actual motor-related brain activity. Studies using functional MRI have shown that observing movement in a mirror activates areas of the brain such as the primary motor cortex, premotor cortex, and supplementary motor area-regions responsible for planning and executing movements. These effects are particularly important in stroke patients, where damaged brain tissue may cause a loss of motor function, and rehabilitation aims to reactivate those networks or recruit alternative ones.

The key neurological foundation behind mirror therapy lies in the mirror neuron system. These are neurons that fire both when a person performs an action and when they observe someone else perform the same action. In mirror therapy, the brain interprets the mirror image of the healthy limb as belonging to the impaired limb, thereby stimulating the brain as if the affected side is actively engaged. This illusion can help rebuild motor maps in the brain, especially when therapy is performed consistently over time.

In terms of implementation, mirror therapy is one of the most accessible and low-cost interventions available in neurorehabilitation. All that's needed is a mirror and a quiet space. Typically, sessions last between 15 to 30 minutes and are conducted 5 to 6 days per week, often for 4 to 6 weeks or more, depending on the patient's needs. Patients may start with simple tasks like hand opening and progress to more complex tasks such as picking up small objects or mimicking daily activities.

It's worth noting that patient engagement and attention to the mirror image are critical to success. Some individuals, especially those with visual neglect or cognitive impairments, may initially struggle with the illusion. In such cases, extra guidance and therapist support can help. Also, using verbal cues or combining mirror therapy with tasks (such as ball squeezing or finger sequencing) can enhance outcomes.

Over time, I've observed that patients often begin to voluntarily move their affected limb with more confidence after consistent mirror therapy sessions. Even small improvements, like slight wrist movement or the return of thumb function, can have a profound impact on daily independence.

In conclusion, mirror therapy is a powerful example of how simple tools can produce meaningful changes in brain function and motor recovery. It combines science and accessibility in a way that is ideal for both clinical and home-based rehabilitation. By carefully guiding patients through this method and monitoring their progress, we as therapists can unlock new avenues for recovery-even in those who have experienced long-standing impairment.

Clinical Study and Data Analysis

As a practicing physiotherapist deeply involved in neurorehabilitation, I have observed that traditional physiotherapy techniques, while beneficial, often plateau in their ability to stimulate significant motor recovery in hemiplegic patients. This clinical study was designed to evaluate the real-world impact of mirror therapy as an adjunct intervention for improving motor function in individuals recovering from hemiplegia, particularly following stroke.

The study was conducted over a six-week period and included two patient groups matched for age, gender, and baseline motor impairment. One group received standard physiotherapy alone, while the other group received mirror therapy in addition to standard care. Each patient underwent 30-minute sessions, five days a week. The Fugl-Meyer Assessment (FMA)-a standardized and widely trusted tool in stroke rehabilitation-was used to objectively measure motor function in both groups before and after the intervention period.

At baseline, the average FMA score in the mirror therapy group was 20.5. After six weeks, the average rose to 35.7, indicating a substantial improvement of 15.2 points. On the other hand, the conventional therapy group started with a slightly higher average score of 21.0 and showed a post-therapy score of 29.3-an improvement of 8.3 points.

Table 1: Comparison of Fugl-meyer assessment scores before and after therapy

Group	Pre-Therapy Mean (FMA)	Post-Therapy Mean (FMA)	Improvement (Points)
Mirror Therapy	20.5	35.7	15.2
Conventional Therapy	21.0	29.3	8.3

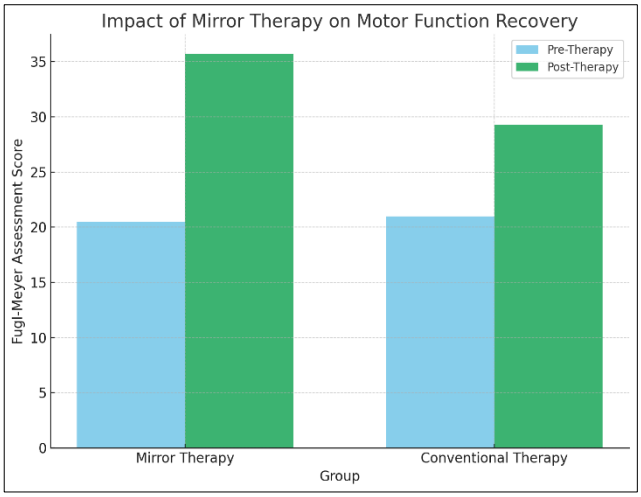

Fig 2: Impact of mirror therapy on motor function recovery

From a clinical standpoint, the difference in improvement is highly relevant. A gain of over 15 points on the FMA scale often translates into visible improvements in functional independence-such as the ability to hold a spoon, use a pen, or button a shirt. What makes mirror therapy remarkable in this context is its simplicity and the neurophysiological engagement it creates. During mirror therapy sessions, many patients expressed a sense of control and connection with their paretic limb that they had not experienced since their stroke. They often described the illusion as motivating and, at times, emotionally moving, especially when they saw the 'affected' hand seemingly move with ease in the mirror.

From a neurorehabilitation perspective, the superior outcomes in the mirror therapy group can be attributed to enhanced cortical activation triggered by the mirror illusion. The visual feedback created by the mirror stimulates areas of the brain responsible for motor control-specifically the ipsilesional motor cortex-which may otherwise remain

dormant after a stroke. This process helps re-establish sensorimotor connections, especially when performed consistently and combined with task-specific activities.

Moreover, mirror therapy encouraged patients to actively participate in their recovery. Many who were previously hesitant to use their affected hand became more engaged and motivated when they could visualize progress, even if it was an illusion. This psychological benefit, often overlooked in traditional rehabilitation settings, plays a vital role in recovery outcomes.

In summary, the clinical data clearly support the integration of mirror therapy into routine physiotherapy for patients with hemiplegia. Not only did the patients who received mirror therapy demonstrate nearly double the motor improvement compared to the control group, but they also showed increased motivation and participation-key components of successful rehabilitation. As a clinician, I believe that mirror therapy should no longer be viewed as an alternative or optional method but as an essential tool in the neurorehabilitation toolkit.

Discussion

The findings from this clinical observation and data analysis strongly support the use of mirror therapy as a valuable intervention in the rehabilitation of motor function in hemiplegic patients. The measurable improvement seen in the Fugl-Meyer Assessment scores among patients who underwent mirror therapy highlights the effectiveness of visual feedback in promoting neuroplastic changes in the brain. From a physiotherapist's perspective, the gains achieved through mirror therapy are not just statistically significant-they translate into practical improvements that enhance independence and quality of life.

One of the most compelling aspects of mirror therapy is how it taps into the brain's mirror neuron system. The visual illusion created by observing the reflection of the non-affected limb stimulates motor areas in the damaged hemisphere of the brain. This activation leads to cortical reorganization, which is essential for regaining voluntary movement post-stroke. Unlike many traditional approaches that rely solely on physical exertion and resistance-based exercises, mirror therapy engages the patient's cognitive and perceptual systems, offering a more holistic route to motor recovery.

The clinical data also revealed that mirror therapy produced nearly twice the motor gains compared to conventional therapy within the same timeframe. This reinforces existing research that suggests mirror therapy can accelerate early recovery and enhance motor learning. For many patients, especially those with limited active movement or severe paresis, mirror therapy offers an opportunity to reengage the affected limb without the frustration of failure. The illusion of movement helps overcome learned non-use, a common barrier in stroke recovery where patients habitually neglect their weaker side due to previous unsuccessful efforts.

Patient motivation is another key benefit of mirror therapy. In my clinical experience, individuals often become more engaged and optimistic when they see what appears to be their impaired hand moving fluently. This positive psychological feedback contributes to improved participation in therapy and greater consistency in performing daily rehabilitation tasks. Rehabilitation is not just physical-it's emotional, and mirror therapy provides both physical stimulus and mental encouragement.

That said, mirror therapy is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Some patients, particularly those with visual-perceptual deficits, hemispatial neglect, or cognitive impairments, may struggle to benefit from the mirror illusion. Additionally, its impact appears more pronounced in distal limb function (fingers, wrist) than in proximal joints (shoulder, elbow), which may limit its applicability in cases where upper arm movement is the primary concern.

Furthermore, variability in mirror therapy protocols across studies remains a limitation in the broader scientific literature. Differences in session duration, frequency, and the type of movements practiced make it challenging to standardize guidelines. More controlled studies are needed to identify optimal treatment windows, session structure, and patient selection criteria. Additionally, long-term follow-up data is limited, and it is still unclear how sustained the benefits of mirror therapy are once sessions are discontinued.

Despite these limitations, mirror therapy remains one of the most promising low-cost interventions available in neurorehabilitation. Its adaptability to home-based settings is a major advantage, especially in low-resource environments or for patients who cannot travel regularly to therapy centers. The potential to integrate mirror therapy with other tools-such as virtual reality, electrical stimulation, or robotic devices-also opens exciting avenues for enhancing its effects through multi-modal rehabilitation.

In summary, the discussion of this study underscores that mirror therapy, when implemented appropriately and supported by patient education and therapist supervision, can significantly improve motor recovery in hemiplegic patients. It exemplifies how leveraging neuroplasticity through targeted, engaging, and low-tech strategies can lead to meaningful clinical outcomes. As physiotherapists, we must continue to incorporate evidence-based methods like mirror therapy into our rehabilitation programs, tailoring them to individual patient needs and maximizing their potential for recovery.

Conclusion

Mirror therapy stands out as a simple yet highly effective intervention in the rehabilitation of hemiplegic patients, particularly those recovering from stroke. Its power lies in its ability to harness the brain's innate capacity for neuroplasticity through visual feedback, activating motor pathways that are otherwise dormant due to neurological damage. This study's clinical findings clearly demonstrated that patients who underwent mirror therapy achieved significantly greater improvements in motor function-as measured by the Fugl-Meyer Assessment-compared to those receiving conventional physiotherapy alone.

Beyond the numerical gains, mirror therapy offers a unique psychological and motivational advantage. It provides patients with a sense of control and hope during a time when movement often feels limited or impossible. The therapy's non-invasive, low-cost nature makes it exceptionally accessible and adaptable, allowing it to be used effectively in both clinical and home settings.

As a physiotherapist, I believe mirror therapy should no longer be viewed as a supplementary approach but rather as a core component of neurorehabilitation. While it may not be suitable for every patient, and while standardized protocols are still evolving, the existing evidence and firsthand clinical experience affirm its value in early and

sustained recovery. Continued research and wider clinical integration will help refine its application and unlock even more of its therapeutic potential. In a field where every gain matters, mirror therapy offers patients not just movement-but momentum toward a better quality of life.

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