

Healthy, Active Tasmania

20-Year Preventative Health Strategy 2026-2046

Submission by the **Australian Physiotherapy Association**

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

The APA acknowledges the Traditional Custodians
of Country throughout Australia and their
connections to land, sea and community.
We pay our respect to their Elders past and present
and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Peoples today.

About the Australian Physiotherapy Association

The Australian Physiotherapy Association's (APA) vision is that all Australians will have access to quality physiotherapy, when and where required, to optimise health and wellbeing, and that the community recognises the benefit of choosing physiotherapy. The APA is the peak body representing the interests of Australian physiotherapists and their patients. It is a national organisation with state and territory branches and specialty subgroups.

The APA represents more than 33,000 members. The APA corporate structure is one of a company limited by guarantee. The APA is governed by a Board of Directors elected by representatives of all stakeholder groups within the Association.

We are committed to professional excellence and career success for our members, which translates into better patient outcomes and improved health conditions for all Australians. Through our National Groups we offer advanced training and collegial support from physiotherapists working in similar areas.

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Executive summary

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Tasmanian Department of Health's discussion paper *Healthy Active Tasmania: 20-Year Preventative Health Strategy 2026-2046* (the Strategy).

The APA recognises that the first action plan under the Strategy will have a strong focus on primordial, primary and secondary prevention, and that the discussion paper is focused accordingly. We also recognise the significant work underway to address tertiary and quaternary prevention through our *Long-Term Plan for Healthcare in Tasmania 2040*.

Physiotherapy operates at the secondary, tertiary and quaternary levels of prevention in the Australian health care system; therefore, this submission reflects the role of physiotherapy and physiotherapists in these settings. The critical importance of upstream action to improve population health is however, strongly supported by the APA and our members.

The APA recognises the importance of a health-in-all-policies approach to achieve the objectives of the Strategy. Governments play an essential role in developing and investing in strategies to create social norms that foster and support good health.

Our members have made clear to us that they support the prioritisation of populations well-known to have inequitable health outcomes and populations who have instrumental roles in promoting health. We are keen to see contemporary notions of 'community' used in considering which populations to target.

Additional investments in physiotherapy focused on prevention will be one of the key enablers of a shift towards more cost-effective models in Tasmania. Physiotherapy-led models of care targeting chronic conditions and associated risk factors enable effective secondary, tertiary and quaternary prevention approaches. These models span falls prevention in older people, prevention of acute injury in sport, physiotherapy-led orthopaedic and neurology screening clinics and primary contact physiotherapy roles in hospital emergency departments.

Amongst the barriers that exist within the current structure of the health system in Tasmania is a reliance on previous funding levels as a basis for allocating health funds. In supporting implementation for a new direction for preventative health, the Tasmanian Government should focus on models that address inequities in access to health services.

The APA supports continued investment in successful programs supported by Primary Health Tasmania, and in e-health infrastructure.

We are committed to working with the Tasmanian Government improve the health of Tasmanians. This submission reflects our willingness to collaborate with the Government to embed safe, cost-effective, high-quality practice that supports prevention and innovation.

Recommendations

Focus Areas		
Improve our environments for health and wellbeing	1	Support physiotherapy representation at all levels in climate mitigation and adaption, emergency preparedness and response and community awareness policy forums.
Strengthen prevention across the life course	2	Invest in public funded physiotherapy to increase the coverage of preventive health services in Tasmania, including pelvic floor therapy to prevent birth trauma and incontinence, falls prevention and osteoarthritis management.
Take a health equity approach	3	Fund physiotherapy services to enable more integrated care, strengthen access and build the capacity of Tasmania's health services.
	4	Deliver fully funded and timely physiotherapy care to ageing Australians according to their individual clinical needs, whether at home, in the community or in residential aged care.
	5	Increase access to physiotherapy to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly for chronic conditions, including cardiorespiratory disease and chronic pain.
Enablers		
Take a whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach	6	Invest in multidisciplinary teams which include physiotherapy in the management of chronic conditions.
	7	Fund new models of care leveraging the physiotherapy workforce to address demand, maximise capability and increase capacity while taking pressure off other parts of the system.
	8	Include physiotherapy, as a part of a multidisciplinary team in mental health services in Tasmania.
Establish strong leadership and governance	9	Engage physiotherapy in healthcare planning and policy.
Contemporary and sustainable funding models	10	Expand advanced practice physiotherapy roles to support preventative health in Tasmania.
Use data and evaluation to consistently learn and enable prioritisation	11	Develop data sets to better understand supply and demand factors for physiotherapy.
	12	Introduce physiotherapy-led digital health pilots across the healthcare system to support interoperability and streamline the patient journey.
	13	Develop e-health initiatives, including read/write access to electronic medical records for physiotherapy at the same level of integration as the medical profession.
Support new and emerging evidence	14	Provide funding to support research and evaluation of physiotherapy-led models of preventative healthcare.

Build a skilled workforce	15	Provide funding for the development of the existing physiotherapy workforce including enabling upskilling and advanced skill acquisition.
	16	Provide financial incentives to support the development and growth of a rural physiotherapy workforce.

Focus area 3 – Improve our environments for health and wellbeing

Physiotherapy and the climate crisis

Physiotherapists, like other healthcare professionals, recognise the impacts of climate change on the health of their patients, professional practices and workplaces, particularly in disaster affected areas. They diagnose, treat, manage and/or prevent a wide range of conditions that are becoming more prevalent as a result of climate change. These include cardiorespiratory and cardiovascular illnesses and pain, diabetes, cancer, musculoskeletal conditions, heat-related stress and neurological and cognitive conditions such as Parkinson's disease and dementia.

As healthcare professionals, physiotherapists have a role to play in adaptation—by building climate-resilient health systems— and in mitigation. As such, they are well placed to advocate for climate action at all levels. By engaging our members, patients and industry partners we can assist in public health preparedness to mitigate mortality and morbidity, and advocate for vulnerable groups during extreme weather conditions.

Recommendation 1: Support physiotherapy representation at all levels in climate mitigation and adaptation, emergency preparedness and response and community awareness policy forums.

Focus area 4 – Strengthen prevention across the life course

Prevention and early intervention health

The APA is calling for a greater focus on improving access to physiotherapy services for all people in Tasmania, particularly priority populations that stand to benefit the most from physiotherapy to support prevention and maintenance of chronic conditions. This should include greater use of, and access to, generalist, community and advanced practice physiotherapists to reduce hospital and medical clinic wait lists, reduce costs, and improve outcomes for patients.

Preventive strategies that include mechanisms to enable multidisciplinary teams, including physiotherapists, are also needed. Physiotherapists have a unique skill set in promoting physical activity with specific clinical populations across a broad scope including for prevention and maintenance of chronic conditions, falls prevention, prevention of workplace injuries, prevention of chronic pain, prevention of sporting injuries, and maintenance of function in those with a disability.

As primary contact practitioners, physiotherapists have the expertise to prevent and manage a range of conditions, injuries and pain experienced by their patients. To enable patients who are at risk of developing chronic disease and pain to access funded physiotherapy services, it is critical that chronic disease and pain services are expanded to encompass physiotherapy as a preventive activity.

Birthing trauma and incontinence

Pelvic floor physiotherapy can prevent and treat incontinence through pelvic floor assessment and teaching appropriate exercises. This can reduce the likelihood of birth trauma, incontinence, lower back pain and other complications post-delivery, which decreases surgical intervention rates and increases the quality of life for many patients.

Falls, fall-related fractures and hospitalisation prevention

Physiotherapy are experts in designing and implementing falls prevention strategies to keep people active and independent for longer. Physiotherapists are trained in maintaining and improving mobility, falls prevention and reduction, and minimising harm from falls. They also provide high-value care, managing

comorbidities that contribute to falls such as incontinence and dizziness. Physiotherapy-led balance and progressive resistance exercise programs are demonstrated to reduce the number of falls and falls-related injuries by 55 per cent in residential aged care. In the community, programs aimed at function and balance reduce falls by 24 per cent, helping older Australians to remain independent in their homes longer.

Osteoarthritis treatment and prevention

Physiotherapy is a key part of managing osteoarthritis with physiotherapy-led programs helping to relieve pain, improve joint function and improve quality of life. Increased funding for community-based interventions that support early access to physiotherapy preventative services, will support the management of osteoarthritis without the need for surgery.

Recommendation 2: Invest in public funded physiotherapy to increase the coverage of preventive health services in Tasmania, including pelvic floor therapy to prevent birth trauma and incontinence, fall prevention and osteoarthritis management.

Focus area 5 - Take a health equity approach

Improving the overall health of the population and reducing health inequities should be a core focus of the health system. Priority populations stand to benefit the most from physiotherapy-led interventions. Achieving meaningful change requires the government's unwavering commitment to addressing the unique health needs of Australia's diverse populations.

The first step involves gaining access to affordable healthcare and prioritising population groups who experience the most inequity. This requires removing the barriers to efficient and cost-effective physiotherapy for people most in need and across priority settings.

Strengthening access to rural physiotherapy

Access is a key enabler to improving equitable health outcomes, and as such governments must ensure that people who need care the most can access it. Achieving equitable access to physiotherapy care continues to be a fundamental challenge in rural settings across both private and public systems. A strategy to address the challenges of delivering physiotherapy and other health care services in rural communities is required, ensuring care can be tailored to the specific needs of those communities.

Expanded support for rural funding models is needed to drive fully integrated care that encompasses telehealth. More investment in incentivised team-based care arrangements is also required to improve access for patients. These factors will lead to the success and sustainability of physiotherapy as a service. The results of our 2023 APA Workforce Census showed that one-third of the participants are willing to work rurally, especially those in the early stages of their career—but require financial assistance to relocate.

It is vital that ongoing funding is established to scale up and replicate successful models of care. It is also important to fund physiotherapy services that will address the specific challenges faced by rural health services. Solutions should support existing providers as well as set up opportunities for workforce growth.

Recommendation 3: Fund physiotherapy services to enable more integrated care, strengthen access and build the capacity of Tasmania's health services.

Aged care

The new *Aged Care Act (2024)* aims to improve quality and safety, but further reforms are necessary. Sector-wide efficiencies can be achieved through targeted measures to increase physiotherapy-led services that facilitate reablement, preventing further decline and other complications of ageing.

Reablement represents an essential preventive approach, improving health and wellbeing outcomes, resulting in cost efficiencies. Physiotherapy treatment as part of a reablement program addresses chronic conditions, reduces falls and prevents hospitalisations, enabling older Australians to live well at home longer and to improve their quality of life in residential aged care. Physiotherapy rehabilitation delivered in-home reduces the risk of readmission and ongoing dependence on services, leading to improved long-term outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Deliver fully funded and timely physiotherapy care to ageing Australians according to their individual clinical needs, whether at home, in the community or in residential aged care.

First Nations health

Physiotherapists have an important role in improving health outcomes for First Nations peoples by applying clinical skills and strategies to manage and prevent chronic diseases. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are preferred by many First Nations peoples due to their cultural focus, providing comprehensive primary healthcare tailored to community needs. Strengthening the cultural competency of physiotherapists, growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander physiotherapy workforce and enhancing access to culturally safe services are key shifts required to make allied health services more appropriate for First Nations peoples.

Recommendation 5: Increase access to physiotherapy to improve health outcomes for First Nations peoples, particularly for chronic conditions including cardiorespiratory disease and chronic pain.

Enabler 1 - Take a whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach

Faster treatment, better outcomes and lower costs are required to meet current and future healthcare needs in Tasmania. The solutions that will fix healthcare lies in valuing the skills of the entire health workforce. There is a need to move beyond traditional structures and conventional primary care towards more integrated care models that include physiotherapy. Targeted spending on physiotherapy will bring more value for money by reducing the need for costly secondary care.

Advancing management of chronic conditions through multidisciplinary care

Multidisciplinary care is essential in ensuring the future healthcare needs of Tasmanians. In driving integration, we need to connect the system to the person being cared for by bringing teams together so that they can provide care, collaborate and communicate for the patient's benefit.

Chronic disease and injury dominate the total burden of disease in Australia and we are seeing an increase in the number of people experiencing a disability, either temporary or permanent, that affects physical capacity and/or mobility. We also know that pain underpins much of the chronic disease and injury burden, with many missing out on treatment that could improve their health and quality of life.

Physiotherapists already work collaboratively with members of other disciplines in the management of chronic conditions in areas such as rehabilitation services, management of musculoskeletal conditions, neurological rehabilitation, cardiorespiratory care and cancer care. We support new models that strengthen multidisciplinary care by utilising physiotherapy-led management and coordination of allied health services that utilise the profession to improve the patient journey and support health outcomes.

Workforce reform and redesign initiatives that address access barriers to care through approaches that optimise physiotherapy scope of practice will facilitate more multidisciplinary, team-based approaches to delivering high-quality care for those living with chronic conditions.

Recommendation 6: Invest in multidisciplinary teams which include physiotherapy in the management of chronic conditions

Better use of hospital physiotherapy services

Physiotherapists possess a wide range of skills that support a patient's journey through the health care system. The APA is calling for these skills to be further utilised to alleviate the pressures currently experienced in the hospital system.

Physiotherapy offers solutions in managing demand by playing an important role in avoiding hospital admissions as well as lowering readmission rates. From the Emergency Department, where expertly managed dizziness, soft tissue injuries and low back pain, to almost every ward of acute and subacute health services, through homebased rehabilitation and in community health centres, physiotherapists work to improve people's health and keep them well, improving access to care for all Tasmanians.

Recommendation 7: Fund new models of care leveraging the physiotherapy workforce to address demand, maximise capability and increase capacity while taking pressure off other parts of the system.

Physiotherapy and mental health

For mental health care to be managed effectively, there needs to be more attention on the relationship between physical and mental health. The overarching goal of physiotherapy is to improve health, and physiotherapists know first-hand the reciprocal relationship between physical and mental health.

Mental illness and chronic pain place significant burdens on individuals and the health care system. Pain that is untreated, or inappropriately treated, can contribute to mental ill-health as effects such as poor physical mobility or loss of function prevent participation in life activities such as work, social activities, exercise and travel.

Physiotherapists are qualified and trained to work with people who have mental illness across all health settings, including hospitals, aged care facilities, disability services, and private practice. They work with their patients to reduce their physical suffering, which reduces psychological suffering. Physiotherapy is part of the suite of health care services that can improve mental health, and relieve the mental distress caused by chronic pain through improvements in managing and treating physical health.

Recommendation 8: Include physiotherapy, as a part of a multidisciplinary team, in mental health services in Tasmania.

Enabler 2 - Establish strong leadership and governance

Physiotherapy positioned to lead

The transformation to value-based care involves removing the structural inefficiencies in our health system and the barriers too many patients experience in their health journey. The physiotherapy profession, at both the collective and the individual level, pursues value-based health care to achieve the best health outcomes and maximise healthcare value.

Ensuring Tasmania's healthcare system meets the needs of the population both now and into the future requires engagement with the entire health sector, including allied health. In Australia, physiotherapists are the fourth largest group of registered primary health care professionals. Physiotherapists bring value-based and evidence-based expertise to patients and the health system. They work in a number of settings, including hospitals, private practices, community health centres and universities and are well positioned to support a sustainable healthcare system that meets the needs of all Tasmanians. Utilising the physiotherapy profession to its full capacity will support the Tasmanian Government in developing and implementing preventative health strategies.

Recommendation 9: Engage physiotherapy in healthcare planning and policy.

Enabler 3 - Contemporary and sustainable funding models

Physiotherapy is well positioned to support governments at all levels in creating an efficient, value-based health care system. Pressures such as workforce shortages, coupled with increased patient numbers, have stressed our hospitals, leading to increased emergency department wait times, ramping of ambulances, and delays in receiving treatment. For those seeking treatment in regional and rural areas, these issues can be exacerbated. Our federal, state and territory governments need to work in partnership to ensure that our public hospitals and community health services are adequately funded to meet the demands of their communities. This funding needs to be directed towards projects and initiatives that can provide value to our health care system.

Advanced practice physiotherapy

Advanced practice (AP) physiotherapy is an established part of the Australian healthcare landscape. Through post-registration competence assessment and/or credentialing, AP physiotherapists are able to demonstrate highly developed clinical knowledge and skills. The skills and knowledge of AP physiotherapists are underpinned by a postgraduate master's level award or equivalent education and training.

Working within the legal parameters of their jurisdiction with appropriate local authorisation, AP physiotherapists work with a scope that may fall within or outside the traditionally accepted scope of physiotherapy practice. This allows them to take responsibility for assessment, diagnosis and management planning for patients who may present with complex, undifferentiated or undiagnosed conditions, undertaking work that has historically been performed by other health or medical professionals.

Advanced practice physiotherapists have been shown to accurately diagnose, appropriately triage and improve treatment outcomes and access to care thus alleviating pressures on our hospital systems while delivering safe, effective and highly cost-effective patient care. Expanding AP physiotherapy roles can support prevention in Tasmania by improving access to early diagnosis and intervention.

Recommendation 10: Expand advanced practice physiotherapy roles to support preventative health in Tasmania.

Enabler 5 - Use data and evaluation to consistently learn and enable prioritisation

Plan based on needs

There is a critical need for improved data collection and analysis to inform workforce planning and policy development. We are unable to utilise the physiotherapy workforce to its fullest potential without comprehensive and accurate data on current and future supply and demand.

Despite being a significant sector within healthcare, there is limited insight into physiotherapy and the key factors influencing workforce growth. A more comprehensive understanding of the sector requires a focus on needs-based planning to ensure a well distributed and sustainable workforce that enhances access to care. Additionally, addressing skill supply challenges is crucial, with targeted support and development needed in high demand areas.

Recommendation 11: Develop data sets to better understand supply and demand factors for physiotherapy.

Integration of physiotherapy into digital communication platforms

Digital health is essential to the future of the health care system. New technologies are providing opportunities to address current fragmentation in the system by improving the coordination of healthcare and preventing adverse events. The use of digital technologies to overcome barriers currently experienced by patients will not only improve patient experience but will also empower them in their health choices.

Physiotherapy is a digitally mature profession; however, a lack of focus and support has resulted in a fragmented and disjointed digital landscape. An integrated healthcare system, which includes physiotherapy, will improve the patient experience. Digital technologies are already commonplace in physiotherapy practice including the adoption of technologies to support connectivity such as digital record keeping and secure messaging.

As part of a multidisciplinary team, physiotherapists need timely access to patient records and tests, which reduces the impost on patients to bring results and information to appointments. Enabling secure messaging will allow for better communication with other health providers, ensuring timely treatment; and the adoption of patient-centred health programs empowers patients by allowing them to be more engaged in their treatment.

Recommendation 12: Introduce physiotherapy-led digital health pilots across the healthcare system to support interoperability and streamline the patient journey.

Recommendation 13: Develop e-health initiatives, including read/write access to electronic medical records for physiotherapy at the same level of integration as the medical profession.

Enabler 6 - Support new and emerging evidence

Investment in research and evaluation of physiotherapy-led models of preventative healthcare is essential to building a more sustainable and evidence-based health system. Despite growing recognition of the role of physiotherapy in prevention, there remains limited dedicated funding to evaluate and scale these models. By supporting evaluation efforts, we can better understand which models deliver the greatest value across

diverse settings and populations. This evidence is vital to inform policy and embed preventative approaches into Tasmania's healthcare system. Strengthening the evidence base for physiotherapy-led prevention will assist in developing long-term health outcomes for Tasmanians while reducing demand on acute services.

Recommendation 14: Provide funding to support research and evaluation of physiotherapy-led models of preventative healthcare.

Enabler 7 - Build a skilled workforce

Workforce reform and building a better pipeline to the workforce

A sustainable physiotherapy workforce is essential in meeting the healthcare needs of Australians now and into the future. Providing structured career development opportunities not only enhances clinician expertise but also addresses one of the primary drivers of workforce attrition.

A lack of career progression has been identified as a key factor of physiotherapy attrition, with limited advancement opportunities contributing to feelings of stagnation. To support workforce sustainability, it is necessary to create roles that enable physiotherapists to work at the top of their scope of practice while ensuring that remuneration appropriately reflects their experience, skills, and responsibilities. Recognising and rewarding those who invest in advanced skill development will be critical in maintaining a motivated and committed physiotherapy workforce.

Recommendation 15: Provide funding for the development of the existing physiotherapy workforce including enabling upskilling and advanced skill acquisition.

Building a sustainable rural physiotherapy workforce

Strategies to support retention requires a strong commitment to improving the policies, programs and infrastructure specifically targeted to building capacity for allied health service provision. Recognition of rural practitioners as a highly skilled, supported and a valued resource is also needed to incentivise career choices in rural health. There is a need to incentivise allied health professions in the same way those in the medical profession are to work in regional, rural and remote areas to improve income streams and make it more viable to practise rurally.

Recommendation 16: Provide financial incentives to support the development and growth of a rural physiotherapy workforce.