

Employment White Paper

Submission by the
Australian Physiotherapy Association

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Authorised by:

Anja Nikolic
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Physiotherapy Association
Level 1, 1175 Toorak Rd Camberwell VIC 3124
Phone: (03) 9092 0888
Fax: (03) 9092 0899
www.australian.physio

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Executive Summary

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is pleased to provide feedback to the Treasury Employment Taskforce on the Employment White Paper (White Paper) Terms of Reference.

The APA believes in a policy vision that values, recognises, and strengthens the whole care and support workforce, including critical healthcare professions, such as physiotherapy, to enable better health outcomes and quality of life for vulnerable Australians.

We welcome the intention to build a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.

We are at a critical juncture with an opportunity to address ongoing and acute workforce shortages that are impacting on quality of care. The capacity to fund high quality care must be found to meet the demands of an ageing population and the increasing demands for high quality healthcare across all settings.

Strengthening policy directions toward sustainable solutions and measures to attract, retain and enable appropriate scope of practice of all occupations and professions among the care and support workforce, including physiotherapists, can no longer wait.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1	<p>Expand the following clause as follows [italicised insertion]:</p> <p>2.1 Building a sustainable care economy <i>upon a defined and full skills mix required to deliver optimal health, wellbeing and quality of life outcomes</i> in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.</p>
Recommendation 2	<p>Expand the following clause [italicised insertion]:</p> <p>2.2 The energy transition and tackling climate change <i>and its impacts on the community and workforce</i> to achieve net zero.</p>
Recommendation 3	<p>Identify the impacts of newly implemented reform programs on the existing aged care workforce, which is reliant on physiotherapy and other high level clinicians, to inform the White Paper.</p>
Recommendation 4	<p>Address modifiable factors of attrition to improve retention and build workforce capacity including re-entry and flexible return-to-work programs</p>
Recommendation 5	<p>Develop a scope of practice and delegation framework defining the assistant workforce occupational scope to inform the White Paper.</p>

The value and future of physiotherapy

The APA launched *its Future of Physiotherapy: A 10-year Vision Policy White Paper* in 2022 identifying the structural changes and reforms required to achieve value-based, integrated care.

The paper outlines the physiotherapy workforce concerns and solutions to inform policy direction.

“There are a number of trends impacting on future supply of the physiotherapy workforce. More focus is required on future proofing the profession through workforce planning that encompasses supply and demand analyses to fully understand the labour market dynamics influencing these trends. Geographical imbalances causing health inequalities require urgent policy attention. The maldistribution of the physiotherapy workforce has an impact on access to services for rural Australians as well as at-risk populations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The high attrition rate at five to 10 years of clinical practice contributes to critical workforce shortages.

As physiotherapy is a highly feminised workforce, more focus is needed to improve re-entry to the workforce of qualified physiotherapists. This also highlights the need to build strategies and actions to support the important task of prioritising national skills planning and retention. A focus on attracting and retaining critical skills through funded supports to enable upskilling and advanced skill acquisition is required. To build capacity and to ensure future discipline growth, we need more national policy attention paid to a number of key factors that influence the short careers of physiotherapists. Issues including poor remuneration, lack of skill recognition and limited career progression factor strongly alongside a lack of peer support.

To provide a more attractive career option, investment in a national training pathway for physiotherapy is required to ensure broad skills exposure across settings. This would allow for a supportive pathway experience and a more seamless transition from undergraduate training to qualified physiotherapist. The way we train physiotherapists must also evolve, including ensuring that the curriculum, in preparation for practice, encompasses new models of care and changing clinical practice.”¹

The APA commissioned the Nous Group to undertake an analysis of the value of a range of physiotherapy interventions. This landmark report, *Value of Physiotherapy in Australia*, has, for the first time, built a robust picture of the high-level impacts and value of physiotherapy to the healthcare sector. The study found that treatments by physiotherapists deliver both

health and economic benefits and that interventions are clinically effective and deliver net economic benefits, with quality of life improvements exceeding treatment costs.¹

Employment White Paper scope

A sustainable care economy must value and be built on the right skills mix.

Valuing skills must be core to the response to attract the optimal staff and skill mix required to strengthen quality of care and quality of life outcomes.

The APA supports the focus on care and support workers in valuing social and economic contributions of caregivers and the use of incomes and equity policies to prioritise and integrate into macroeconomic policy.

However, while we support the focus on and growth of Level 4 occupations, in the context of healthcare provision, it is important to note that these roles are reliant on the development of a workforce comprising high-level skills. Therefore, one component of the workforce cannot grow without a focus on ensuring there is the required mix of skills for safe and quality care.

A more diverse skill mix is required to enable more person-centred approaches across sectors. Significant reform is required to optimise this workforce to allow person-centred, relational models of practice and adequate time for care. This requires a more prescriptive skills focus supporting advanced scope roles that can facilitate more multi-disciplinary, team-based approaches to enable high quality care. It is clear that optimal models cannot work in an underfunded service environment where changing patterns of demand, significant reform and incremental change have not been matched with appropriate changes in funding models. Supportive funding models are needed to fully realise the potential opportunities presented by advanced scope roles.²

The considerable issues contributing to demand across aged, disability, veteran and mental healthcare have hindered efforts to date. The policy inaction in aged care and the ineffective iterative reform approach in disability, where pricing, workforce shortages and uncertainty have significantly impacted workforce development, have limited supply planning, impacting on quality care for our most vulnerable Australians.

Prioritise multidisciplinary team-based care

Addressing the complex and broad needs of vulnerable Australians exceeds the scope of any one support or health profession.

The continued emphasis on the care economy as an opportunity to create jobs and close the gender gap cannot be realised without consideration of the full mix of skills required (care and support occupations by skill level).

Allied health professionals, including physiotherapists, make up 13 per cent of the care and support workforce in Australia, making it the second largest occupation group. Nine of the 15 care and support occupations are skill level 1 (commensurate with a bachelor degree or

higher qualification) and this accounts for approximately 29% of the total care and support workforce. This skill level includes all registered nurses, health and welfare managers and allied health professional occupations.³

These professionals work effectively in multidisciplinary team-based models of care to ensure optimal health outcomes – therefore it is imperative to ensure the “care and support” workforce includes healthcare.

The development of the White Paper presents a critical policy moment to plan and set down meaningful policy action to avoid a health workforce supply crisis.

Addressing workforce shortages

A wider policy lens is needed to seek opportunities from within the entire health workforce, a workforce that is in desperate need of attention, investment and reform.

More focus on investment for all health disciplines experiencing shortages is required alongside funded solutions to achieving an optimal balance of skill mix in addressing patient need. Priority must be placed on the professionally qualified clinical and regulated staff groups which includes vial allied health professions. This group encompasses physiotherapy, the fourth largest group of registered primary healthcare professionals, who are now facing a supply crisis, and are in need of urgent nationally directed interventions.

Despite steady increasing supply, the ability of the physiotherapy workforce to meet increasing demand remains uncertain. Early career workforce attrition remains a key issue impacting on the profession and future supply. There is a need to prioritise retention strategies, including incentivised upskilling and advanced skill acquisition to build workforce capacity. This is particularly vital in the context of an ageing community and in meeting increasing needs of the care and support sector. Addressing modifiable factors of attrition would improve retention building workforce capacity including re-entry and flexible return-to-work programs.⁴

Skilled migration of highly qualified health practitioners is one solution. However, this can only be a solution if fully registered physiotherapists are retained within the aged care sector. Qualified overseas physiotherapists are able to practice with Limited Registrations under the supervision of physiotherapists who have been fully registered for a minimum of three years.

Removing barriers to skilled migration – such as complicated and lengthy visa processes, lack of support to adapting to Australian laws such as taxation, and securing affordable housing – will require commitment across multiple departments.

Integration of the Employment White Paper with multi-sectoral future-focused reform policies, particularly in health and aged care, is critical to ensure the ongoing challenges facing these sectors is fully understood and there is alignment of objectives and actions.

We are receiving early reports of negative consequences of current reforms in residential aged care settings with, significant reductions in the physiotherapy workforce and changing scope of practice being reported. The loss of healthcare professionals who are highly skilled

and experienced in caring for those with complex co-morbidities and needs is likely to impact on the quality of care residents receive.

From a workforce perspective, uncertainty and insecure employment conditions must be addressed.

Healthcare and climate change

Recognise the critical role of the health sector in addressing the impacts of climate change.

The APA is committed to contributing to national efforts to mitigate climate change as a matter of urgency. We are working towards a climate aware and active health workforce committed to reducing its carbon footprint by providing policy leadership, emergency management and sustainable and responsive healthcare to deal with this global emergency.

It is pleasing to see the Commonwealth Government move to address climate change and recognise the workforce implications of energy transition and tackling climate change to achieve net zero.

We urge the recognition of climate change as an existential threat that must be addressed with urgency and national intersectoral action that includes skills, education and training, upskilling and reskilling.

We support the move to net zero and believe addressing the impacts of climate change on the community and workforce – and the critical role of healthcare practitioners across the span of climate action - must also be prioritised.

Conclusion

The APA supports the strong focus on the care and support sector to reverse deterioration of the workforce and employment conditions resulting from previous policy inaction. It is vital that healthcare professions and multidisciplinary care continues to be valued, retained and grown to ensure optimal health, wellbeing and quality of life outcomes for the most vulnerable Australians. We call on the Federal Government to invest in the entire care and support workforce.

Australian Physiotherapy Association

The APA's 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 31,000 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.

References

- ¹ *Value of Physiotherapy in Australia* report, Nous Group, <https://australian.physio/economic-value>
- ² APA Input into the National Skills Commission Care Workforce Labour Market Study, https://australian.physio/sites/default/files/submission/APA_Submission_National_Skills_Commission_Care_Workforce_Labour_Market_Study_23_Jun_21.pdf
- ³ Pg 83, Care Workforce Labour Market Study Final Report, Nationals Skills Commission, September 2021
- ⁴ Pretorius A, Karunaratne N, Fehring S. Australian physiotherapy workforce at a glance: a narrative review. *Aust Health Rev.* 2016 Sep;40(4):438-442. doi: 10.1071/AH15114. PMID: 26536297.