



APA VALUING SKILLS SERIES

ADVANCED PRACTICE

Advanced practice (AP) physiotherapists predominantly have a musculoskeletal background and may work in orthopaedic, rheumatology or neurosurgical screening clinics. Some may also work in postoperative clinics for orthopaedics or neurosurgery, while others work with paediatric populations. Increasingly, non-musculoskeletal roles in areas such as women’s health and neurology are also being developed.

Advanced practice physiotherapy roles have existed in Australia for almost 20 years, primarily in the musculoskeletal area in public health settings. All states and territories have advanced practice services in emergency departments (EDs) and most have musculoskeletal screening clinics.

Focus on AP ED physios






Patients seen by advanced practice physiotherapists in emergency departments have a shorter length of stay, improved pain control and reduced disability in the short term.

Advanced practice physiotherapists in the emergency department independently manage acute musculoskeletal injuries and spinal pain and have strong research evidence to support their role. They also work alongside medical specialists and surgeons, assessing patients on public health waiting lists in areas such as neurosurgery, orthopaedics and rheumatology, and may see patients with vestibular and respiratory conditions.



Results from the APA Advanced Practice Survey (July 2023)

Physiotherapy roles require high levels of clinical expertise

 <p>AP physiotherapists have the ABILITY TO REFER to public hospital medical specialist-led clinics.</p>	 <p>AP physiotherapists are able to REQUEST CT SCANS, MRI AND ULTRASOUND</p>	 <p>AP physiotherapists are able to INDEPENDENTLY ORDER AND INTERPRET X-RAYS in EDs</p>	 <p>Trials of PHYSIOTHERAPY PRESCRIBING have occurred in QLD and WA where it was found AP physios with appropriate training can safely prescribe pain medication.</p>
 <p>In some states and territories, AP physiotherapists are able to request PATHOLOGY TESTS</p>			

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Supporting physiotherapists to work at the top of their scope can address current inefficiencies in primary care and in the hospital sector. AP ED physiotherapists are already well embedded in the state public healthcare system nationally, providing a sustainable and highly skilled workforce base from which to expand services at this level.

Expanding this workforce can help meet unmet patient need at the primary and acute care interface, including in the implementation of **Medicare Urgent Care Clinics** nationally. A significant proportion of the likely patient load in these clinics will be musculoskeletal conditions such as sprains, strains and spinal pain—conditions best managed by physiotherapists.

See 5 facts about advanced practice physiotherapy

5

facts about advanced practice physiotherapy



1



Advanced practice (AP) physio roles require high levels of clinical expertise

AP roles are distinct from standard physio practice due to:

- high levels of clinical expertise and experience required to assess and independently manage specific patient cohorts
- high-level decision-making and risk management required
- unique environments in which AP physios typically work.



3

AP physios have high diagnostic agreement with specialists

Studies reveal that AP physios:

- were as effective as orthopaedic surgeons in the diagnosis of musculoskeletal conditions
- had high diagnostic agreement with surgical findings or medical imaging
- had high diagnostic agreement with paediatric orthopaedic specialists and, in physio-led LBP triage clinics, with neurosurgeons
- physio-led triage clinics were as effective as normal care when measuring self-reported, health-related outcomes.



5

AP emergency department physios provide high-quality emergency care

Studies reveal that patients seen by primary care physios in the ED:

- had a significant reduction in length of stay and wait time compared to usual care
- had improved pain control and reduced opioid use time to first analgesia
- were more likely to be discharged with minimal or no misdiagnoses or adverse effects and reduced disability in the short term
- were managed independently without medical officer support in 50% of cases
- reported high levels of satisfaction.



2



First contact physio practitioners can manage musculoskeletal conditions effectively

Use of AP practitioners in primary healthcare settings leads to:

- reduced musculoskeletal case loads for medical staff in primary healthcare
- the identification and referral of patients presenting with serious pathologies
- a reduction in the number of referrals to specialist services such as orthopaedics
- reduced waiting lists and waiting times for specialist care
- high patient satisfaction.



4

AP physios effectively manage simple fractures in virtual fracture clinics

Virtual fracture clinics have been shown to:

- reduce footfall in hospitals
- reduce costs via fewer appointments and X-rays
- provide high patient satisfaction
- provide good functional outcomes.



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