



AUSTRALIAN  
PHYSIOTHERAPY  
ASSOCIATION

# APA ADVOCACY NEWS

DECEMBER

Year in Review 2021



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# Introduction – the year in review 2021

**Our advocacy efforts have been a story of two parallel narratives this year – COVID-19 and all else – a situation reflected across the entire health sector and much of the community.**

COVID-19 has monopolised the time and budgets of governments, the health sector and consumer advocacy organisations. Despite this, the APA has had a very productive and successful year in advocacy across a range of areas.

We have taken advantage of the focus on the pandemic by decision-makers to audit and realign our advocacy efforts, develop and implement key strategies and continue to advocate strongly in key reform areas. We have:

- redefined and clarified our strategic intentions, positions and asks,
- built upon physiotherapy's evidence base,
- broadened our stakeholder engagement, and
- influenced key policy decisions.

A key strength lies in our policy leadership and our ability to advance our discipline at this critical point in the reform journey. In this pandemic year we have spent this time wisely putting key strategies in place, investing in relationships strategically, and utilising coalitions and alliances well. This, combined with a deep understanding of the policy environment, ensures we position physiotherapy as key to the reform solution as we transition to value-based health care.

APA National President Scott Willis, CEO Anja Nikolic, and the policy team have engaged with politicians and departmental heads across all relevant portfolios in a packed schedule of productive meetings that have resulted in a number of key opportunities for further engagement and advancement of the profession. This included:

- three meetings with Minister for Health and Aged Care Greg Hunt
- Australian Medical Association President Dr Omar Khorshid
- Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care Services Richard Colbeck
- Shadow Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing Ged Kearney
- Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel Shayne Neumann
- Senator for Tasmania Jacqui Lambie
- Regular meetings with Chief Allied Health Officer Anne-marie Boxall
- Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Minister for Government Services Senator Linda Reynolds
- Shadow Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Shadow Minister for Government Services Bill Shorten.

On mental health and suicide prevention matters, Mr Willis presented to the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, and met with Shadow Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Shadow Assistant Minister for Carers Emma McBride, with Professor Ian Hickie from the Brain and Mind Centre, and with the Black Dog Institute.

He also forged partnership opportunities with departing and new Aged Care Services Australia CEOs Pat Sparrow and Paul Sadler, and Leading Aged Care Services CEO Sean Rooney.

# Aged care

It has been a busy year in aged care with the handing down of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety's final report and the Federal Government's response to it. We continue our campaign for specific funding or mandated care time for physiotherapy in residential aged care and access to restorative and reablement care across the aged care continuum.

We released our position statement on aged care and undertook a broad stakeholder engagement strategy. National Gerontology Chair Joanna Tan and National President Scott Willis met with the Federal Government, experts, consumer groups and key peaks promoting the benefits of physiotherapy for older consumers, outlining our position, gathering valuable insights and cementing solid partnership opportunities. Outcomes include:

- a joint letter with the four largest allied health providers to the Minister for Health and Aged Care Greg Hunt resulting in a meeting with his office and, separately, with Department of Health Executives responsible for aged care reform,
- partnership opportunities with the two largest aged care peaks – a webinar presentation developed by the APA to the Leading Aged Care Services Australia (LASA) network of facility owners and managers in the new year; and a joint position statement with Aged Care Services Australia is planned,
- a joint position statement on the benefits of physiotherapy in dementia care with Dementia Australia is in development,
- articles and opinion pieces in key industry publications included *Aged Care Insite* and LASA's *Fusion magazine*, and
- strong physiotherapy representation on all key reform activities.

The COVID-19 temporary aged care group therapy program, designed by physiotherapist Dr Jennifer Hewitt, is being delivered by physiotherapists in 11 Primary Health Network areas. The program – and the temporary doubling of allied health sessions available under Chronic Disease Management plans – are a result of strong advocacy by the APA and our appearance at the Royal Commission into Aged Care Safety and Quality's investigation into the impacts of COVID-19. We continue our campaign for access to physiotherapy across the aged care continuum with strong engagement with politicians, key industries, consumers and health peaks. We have forged partnerships to raise recognition of the critical importance of physiotherapy's broad scope of practice, including with Dementia Australia and aged care provider peaks.

As 2021 draws to a close, a number of key consultations have been undertaken simultaneously at short notice and with short timeframes on elements of residential and home care reform that the APA has engaged with.





## Climate

The APA has joined the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), in pursuit of sustainable healthcare for future generations of physiotherapists and patients.

CAHA is a coalition of health care organisations, research and academic institutions and health consumers, who work together to see the threat to human health from climate change and ecological degradation addressed through prompt policy action.

We recognise that climate change is a determinant of health and by joining CAHA, commit to participating in discussions and policy development on the issue of climate and health.



## Compensables

Engagement with compensable schemes across the country has never been stronger. State and national offices are working hard to build relationships, increase awareness about the benefits of physiotherapy and work towards consistency of fee schedules. Our state branch managers and staff across the country attended many meetings with compensable schemes. While there continues to be a wild disparity in the fees paid among schemes, we will continue to invest time and resources to strive for consistency in fees and maintain relationships.

One of the many great outcomes is the groundbreaking WorkSafe Clinical Hotline Pilot program that has resulted in the establishment of a peer-to-peer support hotline for physiotherapists, psychologists and GPs. As a member of the pilot's working party, we contributed to this first-of-its-kind clinical advisory service.

In New South Wales, the APA continues to advocate strongly for changes to the Consult C definition to ensure that patients with complex conditions are entitled to the level of care they require. There is the potential for the State Insurance Regulatory Authority (SIRA) to introduce this definition which, if accepted, will be the first-of-its-kind in Australia.

# COVID-19

Our proactive COVID-related advocacy to consolidate physiotherapy's status as an essential service has continued. We have worked hard to keep our members up to date, maintain consumer access to physiotherapy, ensure the profession's inclusion in support packages and surge workforce, and strengthen relationships at all levels of government.

And we have supported our dedicated members to lobby local MPs and Ministers. Their efforts strengthened the profession's voice during the crisis.

The APA is leading promising discussions with the Federal Chief Allied Health Officer (CAHO) to secure a single, consistent and universally accepted definition of essential work that includes the delivery of critical-care physiotherapy and physiotherapists as essential workers. We will drive for this definition to be accepted by all state/territory CAHOs as a consistent and predictable guideline for future lockdowns across the country.

We have also worked hard to ensure that physiotherapy's status as an essential service is recognised and that practices can continue to see their clients.

**Here is a state-by-state snapshot of some of our key initiatives:**

## New South Wales & Victoria (hard lockdown states)

The APA proactively sought meetings with various levels of government to discuss the impact of hard lockdowns on our patients, and educate them on the breadth and depth of physiotherapy in primary care.

Our consistent message was that: physiotherapy is an integral part of our health system; we prevent unnecessary presentations to Emergency Departments and General Practice and play an important role in alleviating patient distress; we are a safe, well trained profession, and to date there has not been a single case of community transmission attributable to physiotherapy in primary care.

We formally wrote to the Ministers for Health calling for a review of furlough and isolation protocols for private practice along with definitions and treatment of casual and close contacts in these settings upon reopening after long COVID lockdowns.



## New South Wales

We obtained and provided clarity on delivering support in homes and the definition of “disability” as it extends beyond National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants.

## Queensland

We sought, received and communicated to members that physiotherapy was, and will continue to be deemed, an essential service during all QLD COVID lockdowns.

Member assistance was given to help understand the restrictions with the NSW border bubble and the QLD border closure (in place for most of 2021) and how this impacted members and their patients.

## South Australia

We advocated for private practitioners to continue to provide face-to-face treatment for the urgent relief of pain (chronic or acute) and fulfil existing commitments to deliver services to aged care, disability facilities and home visits during state COVID lockdowns.

## Victoria

Upon reopening, we called on the Victorian Government to urgently reconsider its limited easing of restrictions in private practice allied health care in regional Victoria. While hairdressing, beauty services and retail re-opened, face-to-face physiotherapy care remained available only for ‘essential’ purposes. This represented only a modest increase in access compared to previous lockdown restrictions. Template letters were developed for physiotherapists to send to their local MPs to reconsider the restrictions on access to private practice.

Our campaign about the need for the State Government to reconsider its restrictions on access to private practice physiotherapy that continued to leave many Victorians without proper health care received radio, print and television coverage.

## Western Australia

The APA issued a media release about inconsistent lockdown restrictions on essential health services applied by the WA Government and the urgent need for a national approach to ensure all Australians had access to vital health services during the ongoing pandemic.

Continued lobbying of the WA Government to recognise physiotherapy as an essential service during COVID lockdowns resulted in some specific face-to-face treatments granted. We will continue to strongly urge the WA government to adopt a consistent, reasoned approach to lockdown restrictions to ensure that access to vital health care is maintained. Other initiatives included:

- Lobbying the Minister for Health regarding Midland hospital funding cuts, and
- Consumer campaign “Would you miss your physiotherapist in a lockdown?” with tools including client survey, flyer and social media tile circulated to WA members to share with their patients.



# APA COVID Advocacy

## MESSAGES

- Allow physiotherapists to use their clinical judgement to deliver face-to-face care for essential conditions during COVID restriction mandates
- Include physiotherapists in essential health worker priority access to early vaccine stocks
- Include physiotherapists in surge workforce assisting in the vaccination rollout
- Ensure physiotherapy businesses are eligible to receive assistance in state-based Business Costs Assistance Programs



**Members**

Advice  
Tools  
Guidance

Respond to inquiries



**Media**

Monitor daily press briefings

Distribute media releases outlining issues and concerns



**Decision makers**

Letters, meetings and other advocacy with ministers, Chief Allied Health Officers and Departments of Health

Constant stakeholder engagement to advocate for physiotherapy's broad scope of practice and seek clarification on mandates



**Health peaks**

Constant engagement to advocate for physiotherapy and seek agreement

AHPA and individual peaks



Navigating complexity: eg vaccination mandate environment

Compliance: eg COVID safety plan and patients screening



Latest health directives and orders

Represent concerns of the profession

Legislative change: eg state Poisons Acts allowing physios to administer Rapid Antigen testing

Clarification and specific guidance: eg risk management guide for managing infectious COVID case in practice



Partnership and alliance

Promote physiotherapy

Compliance

Clarity

Assistance

Inform members

Influence decision makers

Increase awareness of physiotherapy



Influence outcomes

Decipher changes

Gain support

Consistent messaging

Joint advocacy

Gather insights





## Digital health

Throughout 2021 the APA have developed relationships with a number of stakeholders to progress our work in digital health. This includes the Australian Digital Health Agency (ADHA), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) as well as other government and non-government organisations. This has resulted in our involvement in national level projects and provided more advocacy opportunities.

This year the APA worked with the AIHW to support them in their Physiotherapy Data Capacity and Capability project. This is part of a broader piece of work to develop a Primary Health Care Information System. The project is exploring the potential for physiotherapy data to be collected and contribute to national level population health data analytics and reporting. The work is being conducted in two phases. The first phase involved mapping the physiotherapy data ecosystem through two digital health audits while the focus of phase two is to develop a set of common, core data elements that can be aggregated at the national level. Development of these data elements will be guided by what data is currently available and accessible, initially within physiotherapy and used to progress development and refinement of an allied health core data set.

The ADHA commenced work this year on developing the next Australian Digital Health Strategy (Strategy). The APA has provided input in many ways to ensure the needs of physiotherapists and their patients are considered in the strategy. In addition to National President Scott Willis meeting with the Agency, we have attended allied health consultation workshops and provided written feedback.

The ADHA has recently commissioned a project to identify the areas of allied health practice requiring data entry into My Health Record and to establish templates to facilitate entry of a best practice data set. Included in the project working group are representatives from the APA.

## Disability

The APA and other allied health, disability and advocacy organisations successfully lobbied against the introduction of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Independent Assessments (IAs). This was a significant campaign that involved National President Scott Willis meeting with the Minister for the NDIS, Senator Linda Reynolds, and Shadow Minister Bill Shorten, the launch of a position statement and multiple media releases, and the APA working with Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) on a media and social media campaign.

Minister Reynolds and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) have now committed to a co-design approach to review the current eligibility assessment model. The APA is already working with AHPA on how best to approach the next phase.

Alongside the advocacy on Independent Assessments, it has been an extremely busy year in the disability and NDIS sector with the APA contributing submissions to 10 consultations, endorsing an AHPA submission, and writing a joint submission with the National Assistive Technology Alliance (NATA) on early childhood assistive technology. Before the end of the calendar year, the APA will have the opportunity to contribute to more consultations including the NDIS pricing review. Aspects of policy and advocacy work in the disability sector can also be seen in other portfolios such as workforce.

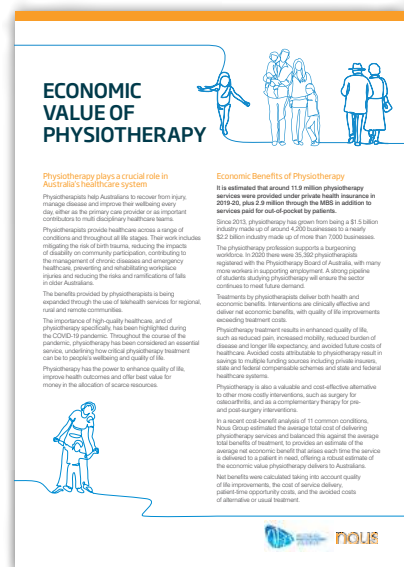
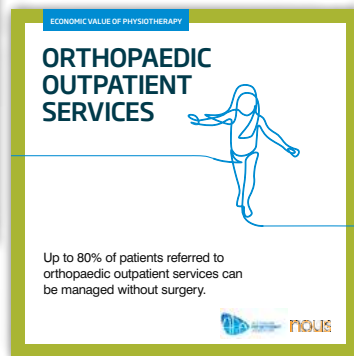
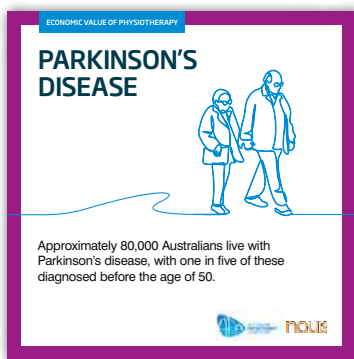
Evidence of the impact of APA's advocacy can be seen in the report by the Joint Standing Committee on NDIS on Independent Assessments where APA's submission is quoted three times.

# Economic Value of Physiotherapy in Australia report

The landmark *Economic Value of Physiotherapy in Australia* report – a comprehensive, independent analysis of the cost and quality of life benefits of physiotherapy – has been launched. The first-of-its-kind report analyses the impact and provides the cost benefit of physiotherapy on 11 common conditions including osteoarthritis of the hip and knee, falls prevention programs, and back pain. The report, undertaken by the NOUS Group, demonstrates the economic benefits that physiotherapy provides to patients and the Australian health care system. The report's findings will underpin many of our ongoing advocacy efforts.

The release of the report was supported with an impressive suite of materials and resources, including interactive infographics and an animated video that we are sharing with our stakeholders.

Minister for Health Greg Hunt requested a full presentation of the report; which APA National President Scott Willis and CEO Anja Nikolic delivered at an online meeting with the Minister. Copies of the report continue to be requested, and almost 500 copies have been sent to key stakeholders and decision makers.



## First Contact Physiotherapy

We have started our campaign for the introduction of First Contact Physiotherapy. Our vision is that the service would be provided by appropriately qualified, Ahpra-regulated, autonomous physiotherapy practitioners, who are able to assess, diagnose, treat and discharge a person without a medical referral – where appropriate.

## Mental health

The APA has advanced the positioning of the role of physiotherapy in mental health care. Following our submission to the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, APA President Scott Willis provided further evidence at a public hearing of the Committee. The final report of the Committee showed that the voice of physiotherapists was heard with the APA's submission and Mr Willis' hearing being quoted multiple times throughout the report. The role of physiotherapy is also promoted outside of references to the APA.

APA messaging about the link between physical and mental health is progressing including in the draft national mental health workforce strategy. The APA continues to promote the 'every door is the right door' approach and demands that the role of physiotherapy is formalised as an integrated part of collaborative care teams. Mr Willis has met with leading national stakeholders in the field and conversations are ongoing to formalise partnerships. These meetings have led to Professor Ian Hickie publically supporting the APA's budget response on mental health on Twitter.

As a conclusion to a fruitful year, the APA launched its position statement on mental health in November.



# Long COVID

Physiotherapists are already delivering vital health services in rehabilitation during the acute phase of COVID-19. Physiotherapy rehabilitation treatment is, and will continue to be, essential to the recovery of thousands of Australians afflicted by COVID-19. But it is also clear that physiotherapy will be just as vital to our recovery, including in responding to Long COVID.

The APA has commenced a national campaign to ensure a strong role for the profession in COVID recovery and rehabilitation pathway planning and delivery. In considering the future implications, we need to move fast to advance pathways to COVID recovery. We are calling for a plan that can allow rapid scaling-up of long-term care where COVID-19 control measures fail. We are also calling for a leading role for physiotherapy in Long COVID pathway planning and delivery.

Physiotherapists can offer Long COVID patients tailored, individualised treatments that enables them to regain function. The aim is to support patients to return to their pre-illness mobility levels, the activities they want to be doing and help them pace through fatigue. Cardio-respiratory physiotherapists in particular, who treat patients with conditions affecting the heart and lungs, and specialise in chronic respiratory and other long-term conditions, will be central to the solution.

APA National President Scott Willis has led a number of ministerial meetings including with the Queensland, Northern Territory and ACT Governments. We also look forward to working with the Primary Health Networks to progress local solutions encompassing physiotherapy-led care.





# Pre-Budget Submission and Budget Response

Our 2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission outlined a 10-point plan to advance the physiotherapy workforce and strengthen care for all Australians. We outlined key focus areas including new models of care, workforce, preventive health, aged care, rural and digital health. The submission urged the Federal Government to fund team-based, integrated care and argued strongly for equity of access to primary health care through affordable high-value physiotherapy.

Media coverage of APA budget responses included the Australian Finance Review, Croakey and Australian Ageing Agenda.

## Primary Health Networks

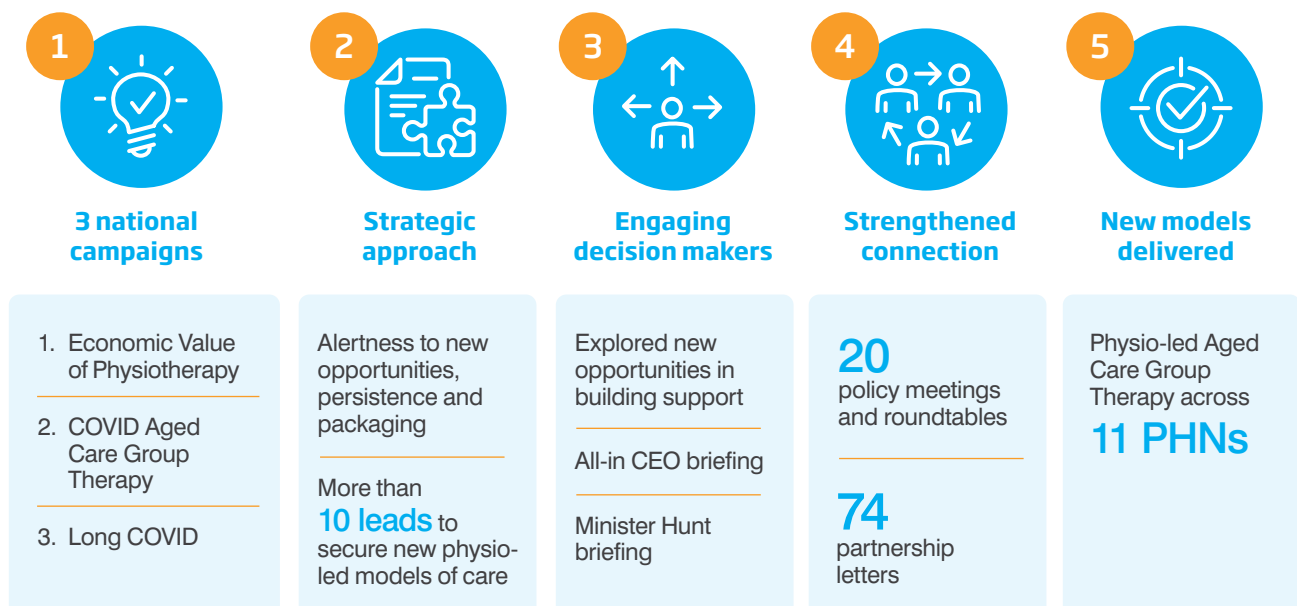
Our Primary Health Network (PHN) national strategy and approach aims to support members to connect with these key bodies to strengthen viability of services and expand access opportunities for patients to physiotherapy.

APA National President Scott Willis and CEO Anja Nikolic presented to all PHN CEOs. The purpose of the briefing was to bring the national PHN executives across the findings of the *Value of Physiotherapy in Australia* report. This relationship milestone is a great start in establishing a stronger partnership at senior levels. It was also the first time the PHN Cooperative allowed an outside agency of any discipline to brief the group.

As a result, the APA have met recently with Brisbane South PHN to discuss potential projects and collaboration. Other opportunities include a First Contact Practitioner pilot opportunity for North Western Melbourne PHN, a number of possible partnership projects for Tasmania and ensuring we provide strategic input to the PHNs national digital health framework project.

We also encourage members to connect with their PHNs locally to ensure that you and your practice are across opportunities.

## PHNs - Our Impact 2021 National Campaign



## Reconciliation Action Plan

We are currently progressing the development of our third Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which builds on our previous two RAPs and will have at its core, the practical steps the profession can take to move towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

A first draft of the RAP was reviewed by Reconciliation Australia (RA) in October, with their recommendations incorporated into a subsequent draft. The RAP is anticipated to be released in the first half of 2022.

Through the implementation of this RAP, it is our goal to provide physiotherapists with opportunities to help close the gap in their communities, educational institutions and hospital settings.



## Rural and regional

Our rural advocacy this year has strived to ensure a stronger focus on the need for new practice viability funded supports that factor in geographic, demographic workforce and training variables. We released our position statement *Equitable Access to Physiotherapy Services for Rural Australians* that called for new physiotherapy-led models of primary care to improve access to services and to ensure practices remain viable. This includes stronger investment in public funded physiotherapy to increase access for rural patients.

The APA made a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs into the Provision of general practitioner and related primary health services to outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australians. We were disappointed with the narrow scope of the inquiry which focuses predominantly on the issues related to the general practitioner (GP) workforce in rural and remote Australia. Within the submission we also addressed our concerns regarding physiotherapy workforce shortages and the need for policy change to address these issues.

Our advocacy work has also sought to showcase the skill diversity of our valued rural workforce. We have called for strategies not only to recruit but also to retain rural physiotherapists and to advance new skill acquisition pathway solutions. In setting out the policy challenges, of relevance in the rural space, is the significant body of work in progressing a rural generalist policy and advancement toward tilting – Rural Generalist Physiotherapist.

## Workforce

The APA has a leading role in shaping the future of physiotherapy through workforce policy solutions to drive contemporary care models and clinical excellence. In the context of the current reforms, we have a significant opportunity to grow as a workforce and shape the future. Our role on the 10-Year Primary Health Reform Steering Group has ensured participation in informing the current reform directions. Similarly, the APA's contribution to the Preventive Health Strategy is also key for discipline growth as we move towards a longer term population-based health strategy to promote wellness and prevent disease.

In enabling discipline growth, our strategic policy approach and advocacy has followed these reforms in directing new models of care and influencing how services evolve. This has required a focus on skill supply issues ensuring adequate supports and focused development for growing areas of need including in acute, sub-acute, aged care and disability.

We have called for a stronger national policy focus to both recruitment and retention planning to build the physiotherapy workforce of the future. There is a need for a targeted strategy that financially incentivises physiotherapists into training and practices where they are most needed.

Importantly, to future proof, much more national emphasis is required on needs-based planning and in preparing for disruption in building a future-ready workforce including working through the skills required to use and optimise technologies.

Our work to strengthen national data capture included policy contribution to the national data capture planning work being led by the Office of the Chief Allied Health Officer. We are calling for a stronger focus on national data capture including supply and demand analysis for physiotherapy – work that is also being pursued through our digital strategy.

In shaping the future workforce, in June, we provided input to the National Skills Commission's Care Workforce Labour Market Study calling for a stronger skills focus to ensure that the more at risk Australians get the care they deserve. We called on the Commission – in setting national workforce directions as part of the Care Workforce Labour Market Study – to use this opportunity to set the skills mix and roles that will deliver quality and safe care across aged care, disability, veterans and mental health care.

Priority policy work has included a focus on advanced practice, first contact and extended scope roles to make optimum use of the knowledge and skills of physiotherapists. In protecting scope, a further focus to influence service planning and workforce development at both national, state and territory levels, has included input to various plans by a number of jurisdictions in progressing the Allied Health Assistant.



# Looking ahead

## Advancing physiotherapy

### Future of Physio white paper and options papers

On 26 July 2021, the President and CEO met with Minister for Health Greg Hunt to discuss policy priorities for our discipline. The Minister requested that the APA provide him with three options papers and a 10-year vision on the future of physiotherapy in Australia. The three Options Papers – Cancer and Exercise; Falls Prevention at Home; and First Contact Physiotherapy, have been progressed by Policy and Government Relations and are currently with the Minister's office.

In progressing the second ministerial request, the 10-year vision, the policy team has developed a draft *Future of Physiotherapy in Australia* policy White Paper and it is expected to be finalised early next year.



**MORE VALUE  
THAN EVER**

Be a part of the voice for the physiotherapy profession and improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

Your membership provides greater value than ever before. Taking into account the impact of the pandemic on our members, the APA has absorbed the substantial increase in the insurance premium for the second year in a row. Renew your membership by 31 December in order to maintain seamless access to the many benefits membership provides.

Renew today.

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30,000+ voices strong

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