



The APA Valuing Skills Series

Physiotherapy in aged care reform and skills



Meeting the complex healthcare needs of Australia's increasing ageing population is one of the most significant policy challenges of our time.

Older Australians deserve the best care to maximise independence and quality of life. There is a need to reorient aged care services towards evidence-based early interventions designed to retain and regain function. The reform solutions that will strengthen care and lead to cost efficiencies can be found in physiotherapy.

Fundamental reform is required to address the current system inefficiencies, to drive value-based healthcare and to ensure sustainability for the future. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety provided recommendations for building a new aged care system. Three years on, with substantial legislated funding changes, there is a need for further reform to improve healthcare outcomes for older Australians accessing the aged care system by fully utilising the skills of physiotherapists.

Facing the facts to address the biggest challenges.

At the core of the issue is funding. Understanding the care and support needs of older people requires a strong policy focus on their chronic conditions and unmet care needs.

80%

of older Australians (aged 65 and over) have at least one **chronic health condition** and 28% have three or more.¹

Arthritis is the most common chronic condition among older people. 49% or

1.8 million

people report that they have it.¹

1 in 5

or 20% of people aged 65–74 report having **chronic pain**, increasing to 22% (75–85) and 24% (85 and over).¹

Dementia now has the greatest burden of disease

with almost 230,000 years of healthy life lost among people aged 65 and over in 2022, a 61% increase since 2011.²

Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death (overall).

For those 85 and over, **dementia** including Alzheimer's disease was the leading cause of death.¹

Source 1. AIHW (2023) *Older Australians. Health status and functioning*. 2. AIHW (2022) *Australian Burden of Disease Study 2022*.

Healthy ageing is key. This is where the better spend lies.

Proactively addressing the complex healthcare needs of Australia's growing ageing population presents an important opportunity for impactful, financially sustainable policy solutions.

Physiotherapists play an important role within aged care in helping older Australians maintain their mobility, strength and independence and are critical to improving function and mobility through preventing falls. Reform needs to prioritise funding cost-effective care for optimal health, with a focus on **prevention, early intervention** and **rehabilitation** to enable people to live and stay well for longer with a reduced need for care and support. Physiotherapy offers solutions that will strengthen care and lead to cost efficiencies.

01

A focus on keeping them home longer



A survey of more than 10,000 Australians reveals that 80% of older people want to remain in their current home and 62% want to receive care services in their own home.⁶

02

Early intervention for optimal health and wellbeing



Comprehensive clinical assessment and targeted funding for physiotherapy across settings helps to prolong independence and manage the physical and cognitive symptoms of disease.

03

Falls prevention – a missed opportunity



Falls are among the leading causes of disease burden and injury in Australia. Physiotherapists play a key role in preventing serious and costly injuries and work with individuals to maximise their function and capacity to participate in activities of daily living.

Benefits of physiotherapy

Physiotherapists are highly skilled health professionals with clinical knowledge of age-related conditions who prescribe safe, progressive and individualised interventions for older people.

Physiotherapists tailor their interventions, taking into account added complexities that older people present with, including multiple comorbidities, disability and frailty. Physiotherapists are regulated professionals with training that extends to a broad scope, encompassing a wide variety of medical problems. Physiotherapists' differential diagnostic and assessment skills and biopsychosocial approach to care ensure that patients receive high-quality, safe care.

Significant reform is required to ensure early access to evidence-based, preventive, physiotherapy-led programs and continuity of physiotherapy rehabilitation across sectors following hospitalisation. The health and aged care interface remains a critical challenge and physiotherapists are the professionals who provide the link between episodic hospital care and preventive hospital avoidance.

It is about function.

Sector-wide efficiencies can be realised through specific, targeted measures to increase the physiotherapist-led services that facilitate reablement.

Function is a key indicator of overall health. The quality of life of people aged 65 and over is maintained and improved by ensuring early and ongoing access to physiotherapy-led programs that improve function and reduce falls. Addressing activity-limiting chronic conditions and reducing falls and falls-related fractures and hospitalisations will help older Australians live well and stay at home longer and will improve quality of life for those living in residential aged care. Falls accounted for 133,000 hospitalisations and 5000 deaths among older Australians in 2019–20,¹ with one in three people over 65 living at home experiencing a fall annually.²

Frailty. A key factor.

Physiotherapists are highly qualified, Ahpra-regulated health professionals with an important role in preventing and identifying frailty and a range of other potentially debilitating conditions by promoting healthy ageing across the life span.

More than half of older Australians are estimated to be frail or pre-frail,³ with more than 80% afflicted by at least one chronic health condition and 28% living with three or more.⁴ Frailty and multimorbidity are associated with higher rates of emergency department attendance. Older people represent a large proportion of emergency department presentations, with multiple comorbidities a strong predictor of frequent attendance.⁵

Falls prevention. A missed opportunity.

Falls are the leading cause of preventable death and incapacitating injury among older Australians.

Access to restorative and reablement physiotherapy care to prevent falls is essential, along with ongoing rehabilitation following falls incidents. There is clear evidence² that physiotherapy-led strength, balance and mobility programs prevent falls in both home and residential aged care settings. Many falls result in debilitating hip and thigh fractures and head injuries that require long-term, multimodal rehabilitation. Unfortunately, many older people do not receive sufficient duration or intensity of rehabilitation to recover from their falls injuries once discharged from hospital. With over one million older Australians falling annually, there is a significant economic burden of an estimated \$3.9 billion.



References:

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2. Sherrington, C., Fairhall NJ, Wallbank GK, et al. (2019). Exercise for preventing falls in older people living in the community. The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Issue 1.
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