



# The APA Valuing Skills Series

## Physiotherapy in women's health



### Addressing women's complex health needs across the life span requires affordable access to existing effective solutions.

Girls and women must have access to the right care delivered respectfully at the right time to meet their complex and individual health needs. Traditionally, many women experiencing pain, discomfort and debilitation have been dismissed, undiagnosed, untreated, misdiagnosed and/or mistreated. To remove the biases and barriers to effective, value-based and patient-centred care for women, systemic reform is essential. First-line physiotherapy improves health outcomes, informed decision-making and participation in activities and the workforce, and helps avoid unnecessary invasive and pharmacological approaches.

#### Facing the facts to address the biggest challenges

Pelvic pain costs the economy

**\$6 billion** per year



**18 out of every 1000** hospitalisations relate to **endometriosis** among women aged 15–44<sup>i</sup>

**60%** of first-time mothers experience physical trauma during vaginal childbirth<sup>ii</sup>

Up to **20%** of women who deliver vaginally have surgery for pelvic organ prolapse and/or anal or urinary incontinence

**80%** of people with urinary incontinence are women<sup>iii</sup>

Physiotherapy stress urinary incontinence treatment = **\$16,810** net benefit compared to other approaches<sup>iv</sup>

Muscular aches and pains, are the **number one cause of declining quality of life** in women during menopause<sup>v</sup>

Pelvic organ prolapse affects **50%** of Australian women<sup>vi</sup>

### The solution? Publicly funded pelvic health physiotherapy across settings.

#### Funding for evidence-based first-line care options can shift the focus from reactive to proactive and educative approaches.

Significant reform is required to ensure affordable access to high-value physiotherapy care. Access to funded pelvic health physiotherapy—including preventative care, early intervention and ongoing care—across settings and where women live must be prioritised. Evidence-based non-surgical or non-pharmacological approaches can address numerous health symptoms and conditions that have a significant impact on women's lives.

#### Prevention and early intervention are where the better spend lies.

#### Proactively addressing the complex healthcare needs of Australian women across the life span is the financially sustainable policy solution.

Prevention is the most cost-effective approach in many areas of women's health. Incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, osteoporosis and birth trauma can have debilitating, lifelong impacts on women and lead to significant direct and indirect costs to the Australian economy. Falls risk in older women increases with osteoporosis and doubles with urinary incontinence, which are both preventable and treatable by physiotherapy. As stigma about women's health reduces and demand for targeted care increases, reform must focus on funding preventive and proactive strategies and education, along with access to affordable early diagnosis and first-line physiotherapy intervention.

**We need a strong policy focus on understanding women's health needs and funding evidence-based care that can address them.**

#### 01 The right care delivered respectfully at the right time

The Australian Government's End Gender Bias Survey reveals that women want affordable access to skilled, respectful and trusted clinicians who can deliver timely diagnoses to improve health outcomes and support informed decision-making.

#### 02 Early intervention for optimal health and wellbeing

Systemic reform would combine better health outcomes for women with a reduction in costly surgeries, associated out-of-pocket expenses and reliance on pharmacology.




#### 03 Women's pelvic health. A missed opportunity

Strong pelvic health is the key to preventing debilitating symptoms and conditions such as pelvic pain, urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

# Benefits of physiotherapy.

## Pelvic health physiotherapists are highly skilled, advanced scope professionals.

Physiotherapists have the knowledge and expertise to diagnose, manage and treat a wide range of acute and chronic health conditions and movement disorders, using clinical reasoning and taking a biopsychosocial approach. Advanced practice pelvic health physiotherapists are uniquely qualified to support women through all stages of life, including the prenatal and postnatal periods, perimenopause/menopause and ageing.

		<b>Pelvic health physiotherapists</b> Deliver <b>effective first-line treatment</b> for the symptoms most commonly reported by women as impacting their quality of life, social and workforce participation and mental health.			
childbirth preparation and recovery post birth	rehabilitation before and after surgery	muscle and joint aches and pains	pelvic pain and endometriosis	urinary incontinence, bladder and bowel symptoms	pelvic organ prolapse
 Perform external, internal and ultrasound examinations and other patient assessments to determine a <b>diagnosis and treatment plan</b> .			 Employ a variety of <b>evidence-based techniques</b> such as pelvic floor muscle training, stretching, manual therapy, perineal massage, breath work and the use of TENS.		

## Women deserve to participate fully in life.

Removing barriers to physiotherapy access will support women's return to activities, exercise and work.

Untreated or misdiagnosed symptoms impact a large number of Australian women. One in four Australian women take an extended break from—or stop—exercise, work or study due to pelvic pain.<sup>vii</sup> One quarter aged 45–64 report that symptoms they attribute to menopause make it hard to do daily activities.<sup>viii</sup> Unmet need has negative effects on mental health, social and intimate relationships, families and broader community. Pelvic health physiotherapists take a holistic and educative approach not only treating symptoms but giving women confidence to reach their health goals.

## Pain is not normal. A key factor.

Physiotherapists are highly qualified and regulated health professionals with an important role in diagnosing and treating the causes of pain.

68% of women aged 18–44 experience pelvic pain.<sup>ix</sup> Many Australian women report that their pain has been dismissed, undiagnosed and untreated when visiting a GP.<sup>x</sup> While common, pain in women—and its dismissal, misdiagnosis and mistreatment—should not be tolerated. Educating women, GPs and the broader health sector that timely referral to advanced practice pelvic health physiotherapists for diagnosis and early, evidence-based intervention can address the causes of pain and significantly improve quality of life. Physiotherapists provide expert management of acute, chronic, pelvic, muscular, joint and neuropathic pain.

## Pelvic health. A missed opportunity.

The burden of disease on individuals and the Australian economy can be significantly reduced by increasing the physio-led services that improve pelvic health.

Strong pelvic health is fundamental to quality of life and significantly reducing the burden of disease of conditions such as pelvic pain, and those resulting from birth trauma and menopause. Urinary incontinence alone affects up to 30% of women over 40 with out-of-pocket costs estimated at \$9,014 per person despite evidence that physiotherapy can significantly reduce or eliminate symptoms.<sup>xi</sup> Pelvic health physiotherapy is a critical first-line care pathway for the prevention and treatment of these conditions and avoiding surgery that is frequently recommended despite serious adverse effects.<sup>xii</sup>

### References:

- i. Endometriosis in Australia, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003.
- ii. Smith, F. et al. (2010). Lifetime risk of undergoing surgery for pelvic organ prolapse. Obstetrics and gynecology.
- iii. Deloitte Access Economics. The economic impact of incontinence in Australia. The Continence Foundation of Australia; 2011.
- iv. The Economic Value of Physiotherapy, Nous Group, 2020.
- v. Flinders University, Vital Menopause Online Research Registry.
- vi. Osteoporosis costing all Australians - A new burden of disease analysis—2012 to 2022, Osteoporosis Australia.
- vii. Pelvic Pain in Australian Women A report from the 2023 National Women's Health Survey conducted by Jean Hailes for Women's Health.
- viii. The impact of symptoms attributed to menopause by Australian women A report from the 2023 National Women's Health Survey conducted by Jean Hailes for Women's Health.
- ix. National Women's Health Survey Pelvic Pain in Australia, Jean Hailes, 2023.
- x. #EndGenderBias Survey Report March 2024, National Women's Advisory Committee.
- xi. The impact of urinary incontinence on female sexual function. Adv Ther. 2006;23(6):999-1008. doi:10.1007/BF02850220 d health.J Am Geriatr Soc. 1998;46(6): 693-699. doi:10.1111/j.1532-5415.1998.tb03802.
- xii. Engen M, Svenningsen R, Schiøtz HA, Kulseng-Hanssen S. Mid-urethral slings in young, middle-aged, and older women. Neurourol Urodyn. 2018;37(8):2578-2585. doi:10.1002/nau.23583