

## Member guidance: Physiotherapists working for sporting teams and at sports events

Working in sport presents exciting and rewarding opportunities for physiotherapists. Whether at the elite level or within community teams, sport offers an environment where physiotherapists can apply their skills, contribute to athlete wellbeing and make a significant impact.

To uphold the value of this impact, the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) believes physiotherapists should be appropriately remunerated in a way that is reflective of the expertise, responsibility, and professional standards that physiotherapists bring to their roles.

The APA acknowledges and supports the many members who generously choose to volunteer their time and skills. Contributing to local communities through volunteerism can be a meaningful and rewarding experience. Indeed, without the extraordinary commitment and generosity of volunteers, sport in Australia would not function as it does today.

However, there are too many instances, particularly in professional sports, where physiotherapists are being asked to work for free or for minimal remuneration (often in the forms of token payments or honorariums), where the expectations far outweigh what is reasonable of a volunteer position. The APA considers these practices inappropriate and not reflective of the value or responsibility associated with physiotherapy services.

This guidance along with the following questions and answers is intended to assist members make an informed decision about remuneration when working in sport.

### **When should I volunteer and when should I be paid?**

The APA believes it's reasonable for physiotherapists to expect to be paid whenever they are providing professional services. Whether it's in a clinic or on the field, physiotherapists should be remunerated for their expertise and the responsibility they are taking on.

The APA recognises that while some situations are clear others are less so. For example, a physiotherapist being asked to volunteer at every match and training session for an AFL or AFLW team undervalues the contribution physiotherapists make to the team success, particularly given the professionalism of these organisations. On the other hand, volunteering at an under 14s regional weekend carnival can be a wonderful way to give back to the community.

There are many examples between these two extremes. The APA has provided guiding questions to help you determine whether volunteering is an appropriate endeavour.

- **Does the volunteering expectation involve substantive and ongoing hours?** Is this a one-off event or an ongoing commitment? Are you being asked to give up time over multiple weeks or months?
- **Will this interfere with your paid work or require you to take unpaid leave?** What is the real cost to you in time, lost income, or travel?
- **Is the organisation a commercial organisation or a charity or community-centric organisation?** Is this a grassroots volunteer-run club, or a well-funded sporting body with resources?
- **Would someone else in the same situation reasonably expect to be paid?** Would a doctor, trainer, or other staff member in this setting be paid for a similar contribution?
- **Are you free to choose whether to attend or not?**

### **How much should I expect to be paid?**

The level of remuneration should reflect your level of expertise and the responsibility associated with the role. Often, physiotherapists working in sport have significant responsibilities and are accountable for diagnostic and management decisions regarding athletes which can have both immediate and long-term consequences.

You are entitled and encouraged to negotiate a payment that's consistent with market rates. When negotiating an appropriate remuneration for the supply of professional services, you should take into account factors such as time (hours/days required), commitment required, level of responsibility, absence from usual employment, cost of covering an absence from usual employment, away-from-home/travel demands and insurance coverage.

### **Should I ever accept less than a full rate of pay?**

Sport can be an attractive field, and some organisations attempt to substitute proper remuneration with other incentives or token payments.

Ultimately, the decision is yours. However, the core principle remains: if you are delivering professional services in a professional setting, it is reasonable to expect appropriate remuneration.

When it comes to the appropriateness of token payments or honorariums, the following information from the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission web site is a useful guide  
[www.acnc.gov.au/tools/guides/gifts-and-honorariums](http://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/guides/gifts-and-honorariums)

### **Should I volunteer for a more junior role if they tell me it'll lead to a higher paid role?**

Many sporting organisations suggest that volunteering in lower-tier or assistant roles may create pathways to more senior, paid opportunities. While the APA does not generally endorse unpaid work as a stepping stone, we acknowledge that this practice may, in some cases, offer valuable experience and networking.

It is important to assess whether the pathway is genuine, or whether you may be exploited under the promise of future advancement. Unfortunately, this is not easily discernible, and it might take some time to find out whether the rewards justify the sacrifice.

Nevertheless, the overarching principle still applies: if you're providing professional services, it's reasonable to expect to be paid.

### **Should I volunteer on weekends to help grow the clinic's business?**

This is ultimately an individual commercial decision. Some physiotherapy practices may decide to sponsor a sporting team or event as a marketing strategy, which may include the provision of in-kind services at a game or event.

On these occasions, while the business owner may waive their own payment in return for the promotional benefit, practice owners have a professional obligation to pay their employees for the work they undertake on behalf of the clinic.

### **Is it illegal to work for free?**

In Australia, volunteering is not illegal. However, failing to pay individuals who are performing work - as opposed to volunteering - is unlawful.

The definition of work and what comprises an employment agreement is complex. In essence, volunteering professional services is lawful when it is genuine and not used to disguise an employment relationship. The following information from the Fair Work Ombudsman helps explain the distinction.

[www.fairwork.gov.au/starting-employment/unpaid-work](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/starting-employment/unpaid-work)

[www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/unpaid-work/unpaid-work-unpaid-work#volunteering](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/unpaid-work/unpaid-work-unpaid-work#volunteering)

### **If I do volunteer, what should I do to protect myself?**

Members should be seeking to guarantee reasonable conditions of employment in conjunction with appropriate remuneration, for example: minimum award wage, appropriate breaks, safe physical work conditions and appropriate leave entitlements.

All APA members who elect to provide services in a voluntary capacity are advised to check their personal insurance policies to make sure they are covered for personal injury and for providing professional services. Noting, APA members on a membership category that includes the APA Member Insurance (Professional Indemnity and Public & Products Liability), are covered for volunteering activities.

Further, an organisations' workers' compensation insurance doesn't automatically cover volunteers. You should ask the sporting organisation whether they have volunteer insurance coverage and request a copy of the certificate of insurance.

Importantly, make sure the expectations of the volunteering position are clearly defined, and that you are not taking on responsibilities beyond your knowledge, skills and experience. And ensure the necessary resources, equipment and support are in place for you to fulfill the role safely and effectively.

The APA is committed to ensuring that physiotherapists continue to play a central and respected role in Australian sport. We welcome your feedback, experiences and views on this issue. Please share your thoughts with us at [info@australian.physio](mailto:info@australian.physio).