

Statement from the Australian Physiotherapy Association on advanced practice physiotherapy

Preamble

Advanced practice (AP) physiotherapy is an established part of the Australian healthcare landscape. Developed to address pressures in Australia's hospital medical specialist outpatient and emergency departments, AP physiotherapists have been shown to accurately diagnose, appropriately triage and improve treatment outcomes and access to care¹, alleviating pressures on our hospital systems while delivering safe, effective and highly cost-effective patient care.

Consistent with the World Physiotherapy Policy statement², advanced practice physiotherapists possess highly developed clinical knowledge, skills and experience. Together with advanced communication, collaboration, advocacy, professional leadership and scholarship characteristics, this enables them to work with a scope of practice that may fall within or outside the traditionally accepted scope of physiotherapy practice.

Although AP physiotherapy has been shown to be successful, the lack of national standardisation in definition and competence requirements as well as governance and service barriers, are preventing AP physiotherapy being utilised to its full potential.

Background

Definition

Advanced practice physiotherapists take responsibility for assessment, diagnosis and management planning for patients who may present with complex, undifferentiated or undiagnosed conditions. They operate with a high degree of autonomy and professional responsibility in environments that may be uncertain, unpredictable and have significant clinical risk. Advanced practice physiotherapy roles most commonly occur in Emergency and Specialty public health services, often operating at secondary and tertiary care levels, undertaking work historically performed by other health or medical professionals.

Advanced practice physiotherapy is undertaken within regulatory scope of practice. Advanced practice physiotherapists work within the legal parameters of their jurisdiction with appropriate local authorisation, with a scope that may fall within or outside the traditionally accepted scope of physiotherapy practice.

Education and Training

Advanced practice physiotherapy requires significant professional experience demonstrated through post-registration competence assessment and/or credentialing. The advanced clinical knowledge, skills and reasoning of an AP physiotherapist is underpinned by a postgraduate master's level award or equivalent and further discipline specific education and training.

Advanced Practice physiotherapy in Australia

Advanced practice physiotherapy roles were initially introduced to streamline service delivery for patients with musculoskeletal conditions in a variety of public health settings. Competence standards and credentialing processes have been developed at state and local levels. As AP physiotherapy evolves, we are seeing positions being developed in other clinical areas, although there is a significant variation between jurisdictions as shown in Figure 1 below.

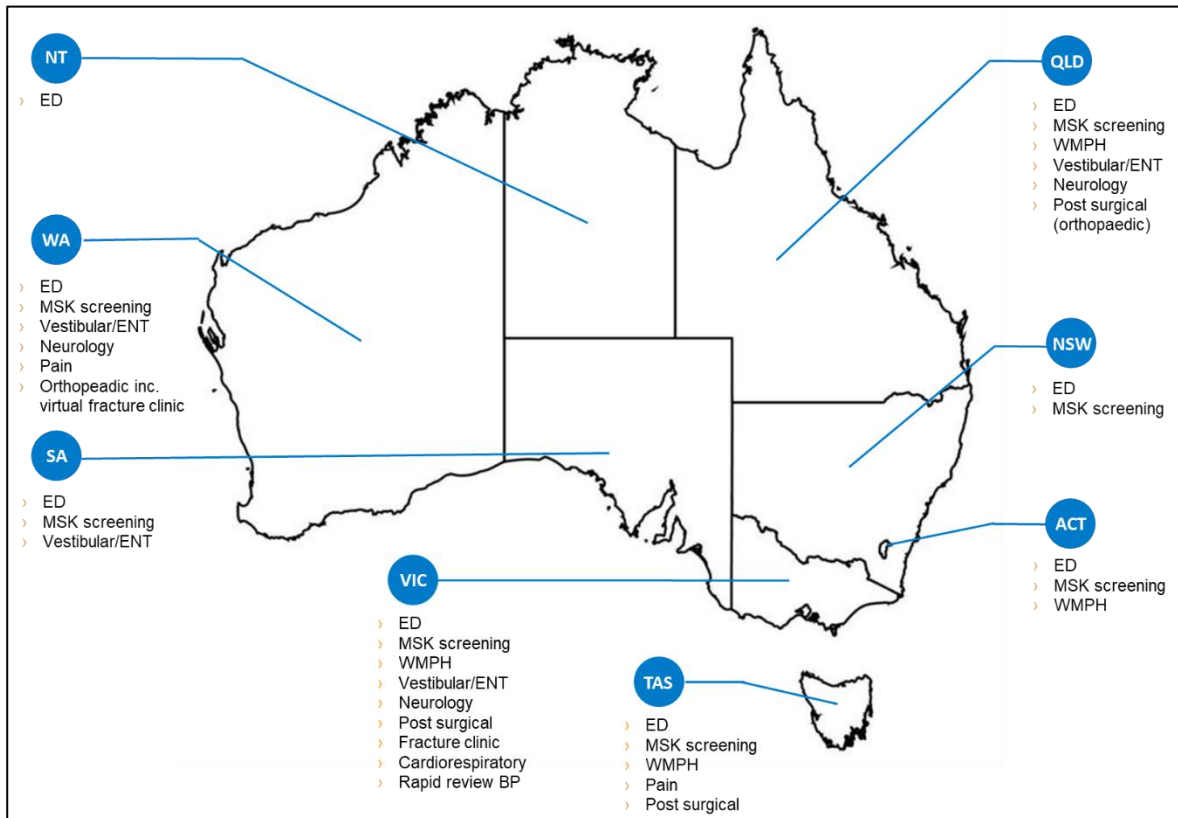


Figure 1: Overview of advanced practice roles* across Australia

This variation occurs in the presence of interstate and territory variation in the governance of AP roles across Australia. This has resulted in a lack of standardisation across jurisdictions regarding training, education, credentialing and skill recognition. There is a need to bridge this policy gap with a nationally consistent framework for the benefit of patients, health service providers and physiotherapists working in AP positions.

Scope of practice

The ability for physiotherapists to work across the breadth of their scope of practice will drive better health outcomes, improve utilisation of healthcare resources and help overcome inefficiencies in the healthcare system. This has been demonstrated through the use of AP roles throughout Australia's hospital system.

Although the skill set and advanced scope of AP physiotherapists is recognised in many hospitals and health services, AP physiotherapists are often limited in their ability to work to the top of their scope of practice due

* ED: Emergency Department; MSK: Musculoskeletal Screening may include Orthopaedic, Neurosurgery and other specialities: WMPH: Women's, Men's and Pelvic Health; ENT: Ear, Nose and Throat.

to the governance structures of their workplaces. This often relates to ongoing referrals, for example to medical specialists or further investigations such as diagnostic imaging and pathology. The inability for AP physiotherapists to undertake such duties places undue workload on the medical colleagues they work with.

APA National Advanced Practice Competency Framework

A National Advanced Practice Physiotherapy Competency Framework (the National AP Framework) has been developed by the APA which will align with the APA Career Pathway Framework. This document will provide a nationally relevant framework to improve consistency of standards for AP physiotherapy roles across state and territory jurisdictions.

The National AP Framework recognises the qualifications, experience and skills common to AP physiotherapy and is applicable across a range of established and developing areas of AP physiotherapy. The AP Framework describes the advanced clinical, communication, collaboration, advocacy, professional leadership and scholarship characteristics of advanced physiotherapy practice. The competencies outlined in the National AP Framework provide guidance to health services in establishing assessment criteria and descriptions of AP physiotherapy, thus facilitating consistent development of physiotherapists working towards these roles.

Recommendations

The APA recommends:

1. Consistent application of the definition of Advanced Physiotherapy Practice
2. Investment in innovative service delivery models employing Advanced practice physiotherapists
3. Enactment of regulatory, workplace governance and policy changes that enable AP physiotherapists to work efficiently and to their full potential
4. Remuneration of AP physiotherapists commensurate with their level of expertise and the accountabilities and responsibility of their roles
5. Adoption and consistent application of the APA Competence Framework, when released, for AP physiotherapy across state and territory jurisdictions
6. Investment in workforce development for sustainability of advanced practice roles
7. Removal of funding barriers to AP physiotherapists working to their full potential

Conclusion

The APA supports a healthcare system that enables the demonstrated benefits of advanced practice physiotherapy to be fully realised. The APA advocates for regulatory, workplace governance and funding reforms to optimise the full utilisation of AP capabilities across all levels of health care. Central to this is the need for consistency in definition and competence standards across all jurisdictions.

References

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2. World Physiotherapy. Policy statement: Advanced physiotherapy practice. London, UK: World Physiotherapy; 2023. Available from: <https://world.physio/policy/ps-advanced-pt-practice>
3. Australian Physiotherapy Association. *Policy and Government Relations Advanced Practice Survey*. 2023.