



01

OUR
SOLUTIONS

Planning for the health workforce of the future

Introduction

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) welcomes the opportunity to provide solutions to the Victorian Government's future Health Workforce Plan. For the physiotherapy workforce, the pandemic has had a sharp impact on our labour force nationally which has seen an unprecedented fall in employment, a dramatic drop in hours worked, resulting in significant increase in underemployment, and increased difficulty filling vacancies, particularly in regional and rural areas. The impact of COVID-19 and unresolved gender disparity impact in particular needs policy leadership to direct workforce planning and incentives for post-COVID recovery. It is essential that the workforce continues to be supported during the current sustained period of increased demand and the projected increase in future demand.

The APA has strong solutions to mobilising our workforce in Victoria across your key themes in addressing issue of supply, capability, wellbeing, and innovation.

- 01 Prioritise physiotherapy workforce planning through an increased focus on recruitment and retention with attention to **skill supply** issues in addressing increasing complex need.
- 02 Build workforce **capability** through supporting the physiotherapy workforce in primary, community and acute care through funding new models of care that address access, demand, maximise capability and increase capacity while taking pressure off other parts of the system.
- 03 Strengthen workforce **wellbeing** through focused measures that can build leadership capability and resilience of the health workforce with specific focus on individual wellbeing offerings and strategies to address retention.
- 04 Build on **innovations** from the pandemic including unlocking new potential through investments in a digital health ecosystem that puts the patient first and makes access to healthcare equitable.

VALUING SKILLS

Strategies to mobilising the physiotherapy workforce

01 Skill supply issues

Prioritise physiotherapy workforce planning through an increased focus on recruitment and retention with attention to **skill supply issues** in addressing increasing complex need.

Keeping pace with increasing demand

Despite steady increasing supply, the ability of the physiotherapy workforce to meet increasing demand remains uncertain. Early career workforce attrition remains a key issue impacting on the profession and future supply, and retention of experienced clinicians. The pandemic has worsened critical workforce shortages by limiting our ability to supplement the workforce through skilled migration. There is strong evidence of increasing physiotherapy workforce shortages with a gendered impact from COVID at a national level. It is unlikely that steady growth in new graduates entering the physiotherapy profession and increasing registered physiotherapists each year will be enough.

These problems will not resolve without a much stronger national focus to both recruitment and retention planning to build the physiotherapy workforce we need nationally to address maldistribution. In addition, at the national level, more focus on needs assessment and workforce data to truly understand demand and supply issues. There is a need to establish a national minimum allied health data set to underpin strategies to build a stronger physiotherapy workforce and inform service requirements.

To future proof, more emphasis on needs-based planning is needed to ensure sustainable supply and distribution of the physiotherapy workforce that optimises access and addresses needs. More policy focus on skill supply issues is recommended ensuring adequate supports and focused development for growing areas of need is required. This requires a more prescriptive skills focus supporting advanced scope roles that can facilitate more multidisciplinary, team-based approaches to enable high-quality care. There is also a need to prioritise retention strategies, including incentivised upskilling and advanced skill acquisition to build workforce capacity.

Potential opportunities

- 1.1 **Allied health workforce planning** encompassing needs assessment and targets for rural physiotherapy workforce growth.
- 1.2 **Workforce grants and policy** to financially incentivise rural physiotherapists into training and practices where they are needed most.
- 1.3 **Funding for an advanced skill pathway** to support physiotherapists to upskill to meet a need in their community.
- 1.4 **Prioritising workforce solutions** that focus on facilitating rural generalist physiotherapist advanced skills acquisition and use across a range of clinical areas of practice.

02 Building capability

Build workforce **capability** through supporting the physiotherapy workforce in primary, community and acute care through funding new models of care that address demand, maximise capability and increase capacity while taking pressure off other parts of the system.

Better utilisation of the existing workforce

Physiotherapy provides value to Victorians at all stages of life and in response to many different life events. However, it is often underutilised yet there is strong evidence for integrated care models that include allied health services. We need to instigate solutions beyond outdated medical models and sole discipline focus to get the best health and efficiency outcomes. Physiotherapists routinely interact with high-risk populations in need of preventive care in primary health care settings, hospitals, and community health services, and can embed health promotion and prevention activities into routine care.

Physiotherapy is well positioned to support governments at all levels in creating an efficient, value-based health care system. Pressures such as workforce shortages, coupled with increased patient numbers, have stressed our hospitals, leading to increased emergency department wait times, ramping of ambulances, and delays in receiving treatment. For those seeking treatment in regional and rural areas, these issues can be exacerbated. Our federal, state and territory governments need to work in partnership to ensure that our public hospitals and community health services are adequately funded to meet the demands of their communities. This funding needs to be directed towards projects and initiatives that can provide value to our health care system.

Advanced practice physiotherapists work in Emergency Departments and have proven to be effective in reducing wait times and length of stay, freeing medical teams to manage higher acuity presentations. Many musculoskeletal injuries and complaints slow down patient flow in the Emergency Department and take medical staff away from the more serious problems that they are ideally trained to diagnose and treat. Physiotherapists are trained to diagnose and treat soft tissue injury, acute back pain and un-displaced fractures. They are also ideally placed to assess and identify more complex trauma and refer it on appropriately. Physiotherapy is a valuable and cost-effective alternative to other more costly interventions, such as surgery for osteoarthritis, and as a complementary and evidence-based therapy for pre and post-surgery interventions.

In addressing the mental health workforce constraints, there is an opportunity to embed a person-centred approach to bringing physical and mental health back together and formalise the role of physiotherapy in mental health care. Physiotherapists are trained in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary care, but Australia's mental health system limits this care by not properly investing in and promoting team-based care. To make the every door is the right door approach a reality of the mental health care system, the role of physiotherapists need to be formalised within multidisciplinary teams across all settings.

Potential opportunities

- 2.1 **Fund new models of care** leveraging the physiotherapy workforce to address demand, maximise capability and increase capacity while taking pressure off other parts of the system.
- 2.2 **Develop advanced practice physiotherapy** in acute care to improve the patient journey (links to 1.1).
- 2.3 **Fund pre and post-surgery interventions** including a physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis pre- and post-operative packages for osteoarthritis, cardiac, thoracic and abdominal surgery
- 2.4 **Further leverage the physiotherapy workforce** in mental health care including in building new workforce cohorts and services models as part of the *Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Capability Framework* (action area 1c: building emergent and new workforces), and expand to all settings.

03 Wellbeing

Strengthen workforce **wellbeing** through focused measures that can build leadership skills and resilience of the Victorian health workforce with specific focus on individual wellbeing offerings and strategies to address retention.

Keeping the health workforce strong

The APA welcomes the Victorian Government's focus on strengthening workforce wellbeing as part of the future Health Workforce Plan build. For physiotherapy, as is the case across all disciplines, there are a number of areas that require focus to build resilience in private practice, and across the community sector and hospital setting. These include important individual aspects of worker well-being including satisfaction, and individual mental and physical health, as well as broader aspects of the organisational environment to support wellbeing such as workplace culture and practices. It is also imperative in a workforce strategy to capture the value of investing in a supportive training pathway including adequate supports to build teaching and supervision capacity in the private practice context. Retention strategies to address the gendered COVID impact on our profession with specific female participation measures and associated supports are needed, as are targeted measures to address the high attrition rate at five to 10 years of clinical practice.

Potential opportunities

- 3.1 **Build early career and retention strategies** in as part of the wellbeing focus and measures of the future Health Workforce Plan.
- 3.2 **Ensure access to professional education programs** that build leadership of self, leading teams and resilience capacity
- 3.3 **Release and embed** the Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Capability Framework.

04 Innovation

Build on **innovations** from the pandemic including unlocking new potential through investments in a digital health ecosystem that puts the patient first.

A missed opportunity

A fully integrated health system has the potential to improve patient care and outcomes and the adoption of digital technologies will be essential to achieving this. This has been identified in *Victoria's digital health roadmap* which outlines *Five programs of work* to continue to improve the safety and quality of health care in Victoria.

Ensuring physiotherapy is integrated into the digital ecosystem is essential to ensure the success of the Five programs. To ensure the full potential of digital health is realised, all aspects of the health care system and full health workforce need to be engaged. This includes the physiotherapy profession who are essential in ensuring digital health is adopted across the entire health care landscape. If we are to harness the full potential of digital health care in Australia, targeted investment is required to leverage digital health solutions across all patient pathways. This would require funding to test and trial system-wide solutions encompassing physiotherapy.

Potential opportunities

- 4.1 **Fund a physiotherapy-led pilot** within primary care and the hospital system that partners with industry to continue care within the community to support interoperability and streamline the patient journey.