

# Physiotherapy: high-value care for all in the Australian Capital Territory

Invest in physiotherapy and put patients first. Together, we can shape a healthier future for the Australian Capital Territory.

**Australian Physiotherapy Association  
2024 Australian Capital Territory Election Priorities**

# Physiotherapy in context

Physiotherapists bring value-based and evidence-based expertise to patients and the health system. They are an important part of healthcare across the life span, with general practitioners referring more patients to physiotherapists than to any other single group. As primary contact practitioners, physiotherapists have the expertise to manage the care of patients at various stages of the chronic disease continuum.

In Australia, physiotherapists rank as the fourth largest group among registered primary healthcare professionals. They work in a number of settings, including hospitals, private practices, community health centres and universities.

Physiotherapists are highly qualified health professionals who work in partnership with their patients to help people get better and stay well. They assess, diagnose, treat and work to prevent injury, disease and disability through evidence-based interventions.

Physiotherapists work within diverse contexts of practice, including primary and community care and inpatient and outpatient services across emergency and acute, subacute and post-acute care. Their role extends to injury prevention, rehabilitation, maintenance of functional mobility, chronic disease management, health promotion, patient and carer education, occupational health and sport settings.

Physiotherapists are clinical leaders who work both individually and across multidisciplinary teams. The skills and training of physiotherapists equip them to work across a wide variety of conditions and disabilities to improve the health status of individuals across their life span. Physiotherapists also work to deliver improved population health outcomes within their local areas.

## A physiotherapist can diagnose

Physiotherapists **diagnose** injuries and disorders associated with the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular and neurological systems.



## Physiotherapists use clinical reasoning for diagnosis and treatment



Physiotherapists have clinical skills across all anatomical and neurophysiological domains and use evidence-informed **clinical reasoning** to assist and advise the patient, their medical practitioner, caregivers and their healthcare team in ongoing management.

## Physiotherapists are regulated under the National Scheme

Physiotherapists must be **registered** with the Physiotherapy Board of Australia and meet the Board's registration standards to be able to practise in Australia.



# Invest in physiotherapy to advance health, improve care and increase value

Physiotherapy is essential care for people in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) if they are to maximise their health. Almost half of all adults (48.7 per cent) living in the ACT have a chronic condition and 11.6 per cent report living with two or more chronic conditions. Too many people in the ACT are unable to access services for prevention, early detection and quality care. This means they have to live with chronic conditions such as back problems, arthritis and chronic pain. Investing in publicly funded physiotherapy will advance health, improve care and increase value.

Reform begins by improving the patient pathway and physiotherapy plays an important role in this.

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) has identified priority areas and solutions that will strengthen care for all people in the ACT, while also reducing inequity, through physiotherapy-led models.

We are calling on candidates for the 2024 ACT election to support **four policy priorities**:



Invest in physiotherapy **non-operative pathways** and keep people out of hospital.



Optimise the **expertise of physiotherapists** at the community and hospital interface through funded support care transitions to improve patient outcomes and reduce length of stay.



Develop a **sustainable physiotherapy workforce** through training and employment incentives.



Fund, support and embed **advanced practice** physiotherapists in ACT Health primary care settings.

These priorities provide solutions for the incoming ACT Government to **invest in physiotherapy**, so we can realise real reform through improved access to essential care, reduced out-of-pocket costs and, most importantly, a decreased need for costly and inefficient treatments.

# Invest in physiotherapy and put patients first

Physiotherapy provides a path to better health for all in the ACT. Opportunities exist for the next government to leverage physiotherapy in leading health reform. Long wait times, fragmented services, inadequate funding, lack of workforce sustainability and affordability factors mean that the current health system leaves too many people without access to the essential care they need. It is those most in need, our high-priority groups, who are disproportionately affected.

The ACT Government is at the forefront of national health reform, with initiatives such as the nurse-led walk-in clinics and the implementation of advanced practice physiotherapy. Physiotherapists are ideally positioned to contribute to and lead alternative initiatives that will support the provision of efficient healthcare services in the ACT.

The solutions that will fix healthcare lie in:

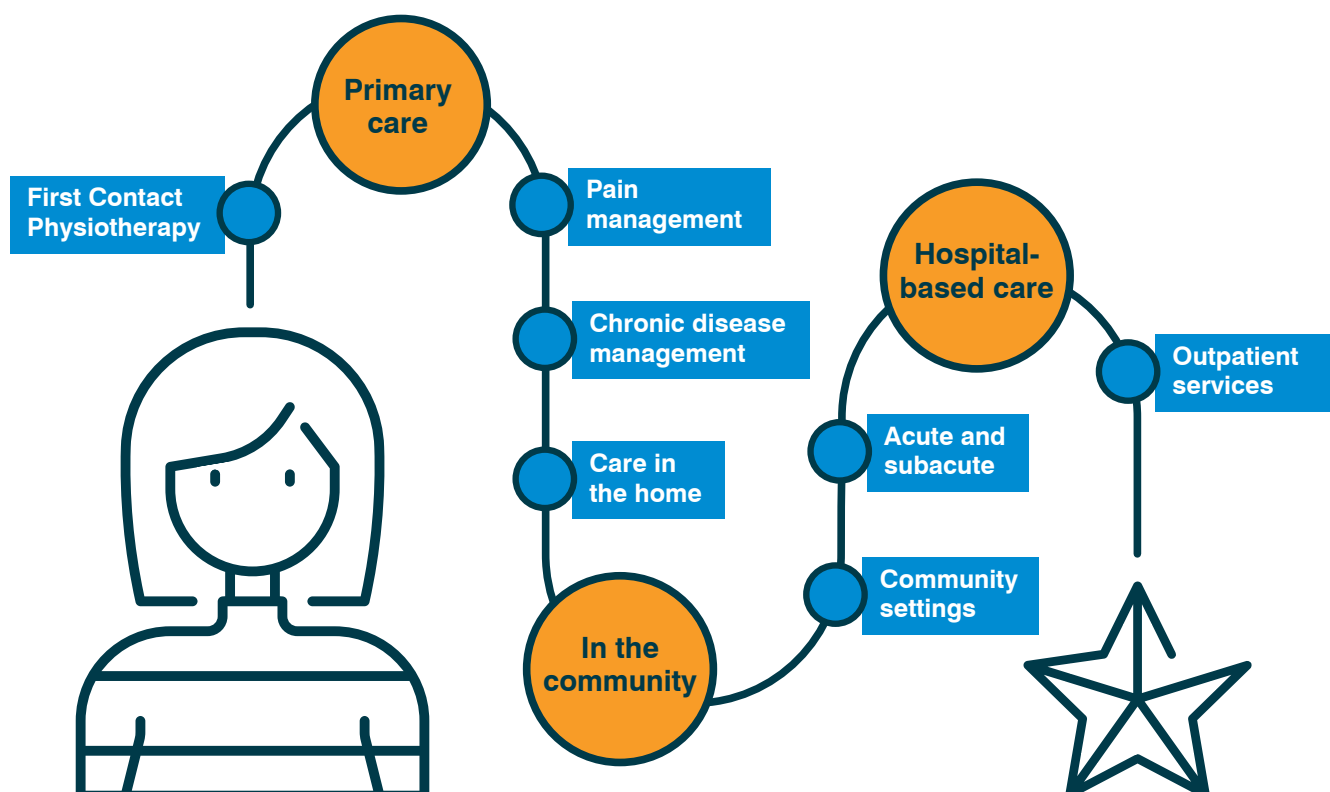
- valuing the skills of the entire health workforce
- integration
- lifting the structural barriers to strengthen access
- streamlining the patient journey.

It is through the priority areas and solutions outlined in this statement that we can begin to provide greater value to all in the ACT.

In this 2024 Australian Capital Territory Election Priorities Statement, the APA presents ways to connect and integrate care. The solutions will help deliver on the four outcomes that governments and patients want—high-value care, reduced costs, improved efficiency and enhanced patient ownership of their own healthcare.

## How physiotherapy supports patient outcomes

A visual representation of the delivery of preventive care, treatment and rehabilitative physiotherapy services across the life span in selected populations and settings.



# Our solutions will improve the patient journey, deliver cost-effective services and enhance patient care:



## 01 Use physiotherapy in non-operative care pathways

Physiotherapy provides alternative pathways that reduce hospital presentations, prevent unnecessary hospitalisations and reduce readmission rates. By keeping people out of hospital in the first place, we address the urgent need to alleviate the current pressures on the public hospital system. Therefore, investing in physiotherapy is a critical component of health reform.



## 02 Optimise the expertise of physiotherapists at the community and hospital interface

Physiotherapists play a vital role in the ACT health system, including in the community. They assess and treat a diverse range of patients and conditions. By investing in community-based physiotherapy services, we can reduce hospital presentations and improve patient flow, including in emergency departments, by providing more timely access to care. This will reduce the burden on the hospital system.



## 03 Develop a sustainable physiotherapy workforce

A sustainable physiotherapy workforce is essential to providing optimal care to those living in the ACT. Achieving this requires workforce policy solutions that address the barriers being faced by students, graduates and employers. Supportive training environments for students, along with targeted incentives that encourage physiotherapists to remain in the ACT, provide the foundations for developing a sustainable pipeline of physiotherapists.



## 04 Grow advanced practice physiotherapist roles in hospitals and community settings

Advanced practice physiotherapists are an integral part of our hospital system, working as key members of multidisciplinary teams in emergency departments and outpatient clinics. The ACT is a national leader in developing innovative models of care that encompass advanced practice physiotherapy; however, the skills and expertise of this workforce can be further utilised to improve patient care. Models such as funded first contact physiotherapy provide an opportunity for the ACT Government to further embed advanced practice physiotherapy into the healthcare system.



PRIORITY AREA ONE



Use physiotherapy in **non-operative pathways** to keep patients out of hospital

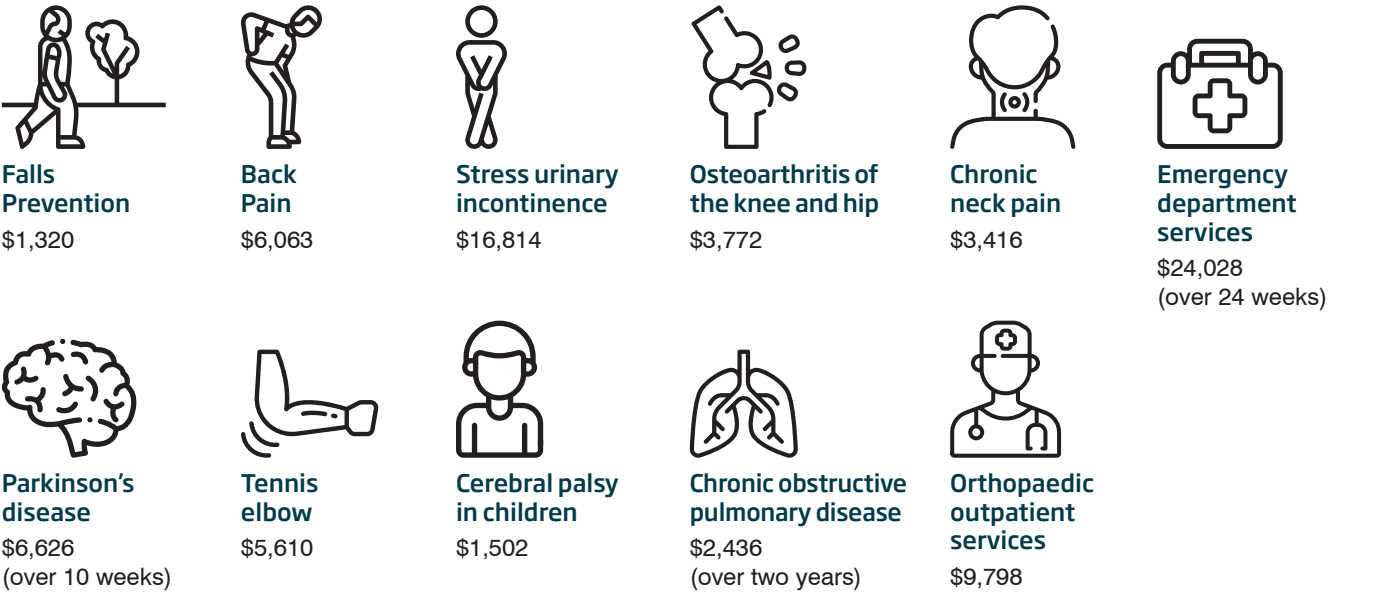
Physiotherapy provides value to ACT residents at all stages of life and in response to many different life events. However, physiotherapy is often underused, despite strong evidence suggesting that integrated care models that include physiotherapy services reduce rates of hospitalisation and surgery. We need to instigate solutions beyond outdated medical-centric models to get the best health and efficiency outcomes.

Physiotherapists can make a greater contribution to primary healthcare to help prevent unnecessary hospitalisations. This will enable more timely and appropriate intervention.

Physiotherapists have the skills and knowledge to embed health promotion and prevention activities into routine care. The cost-effectiveness of physiotherapy interventions is proven in the literature and through the cost-benefit analysis (Nous Group 2020), which builds a robust picture of the high-level impacts and value that physiotherapy provides to the healthcare sector.

Value of physiotherapy in Australia

Physiotherapy delivers an average net-benefit for a range of life events and stages.



Source: Nous (2020)  
Approach and methodology: Net-benefits were calculated accounting for quality of life improvements, the cost of service delivery, patient-time opportunity costs, the avoided costs of alternative or usual treatment, and calculated over a period of time. Please refer to full report for details. Nous Group. (2020). Value of Physiotherapy in Australia. Australian Physiotherapy Association. [https://australian.physio/sites/default/files/Report\\_FA\\_WEB.pdf](https://australian.physio/sites/default/files/Report_FA_WEB.pdf)

## Priority 1.1 | Invest in physiotherapy-led early intervention and prevention strategies

**Action: Invest in publicly funded physiotherapy to increase the coverage of preventive health services in the ACT.**

The APA is calling for improved access to physiotherapy services so all people in the ACT, particularly priority populations that stand to benefit the most from physiotherapy, can receive support for the prevention and maintenance of chronic conditions. This includes musculoskeletal conditions, continence issues and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

### **Birth trauma and incontinence**

Pelvic floor physiotherapy in an outpatient setting can help prevent and treat incontinence by assessing and teaching appropriate pelvic floor exercises. This can reduce the likelihood of birth trauma, incontinence, lower back pain and other complications post-delivery, which decreases surgical intervention rates and increases the quality of life for many patients.

### **Falls, fall-related fractures and hospitalisation prevention**

Physiotherapy and fall-prevention strategies can keep people active and independent for longer. Publicly funded physiotherapy-led fall prevention programs keep older Australians out of hospital.

## Priority 1.2 | Optimise patient outcomes during care transitions

**Action: Prioritise physiotherapy-led funding and packages in the community, including in-home care.**

Physiotherapy improves patient physical function to facilitate a timely and safe discharge from hospital. It also reduces readmission rates by providing treatment and at-home rehabilitation for people with stroke, fall injuries, long hospital stays, traumatic brain injury, post-surgical conditions and chronic disease.

## Priority 1.3 | Improve access to care pathways for chronic conditions

**Action: Prioritise access to physiotherapy for people with chronic conditions.**

Physiotherapy plays a vital role in the management of chronic conditions across musculoskeletal, pain, cardiorespiratory and neurological conditions. Current funding arrangements provide extremely limited access to allied health services for patients with chronic conditions. This is insufficient to address their complex needs.

Outpatient physiotherapy-led pulmonary rehabilitation programs provide education and exercise, empower chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and respiratory patients to self-manage and reduce the risk of hospitalisation and complications while in hospital.

PRIORITY AREA TWO



Optimise the **expertise of physiotherapists** at the community and hospital interface through funded support care transitions to improve patient outcomes and reduce length of stay

Faster treatment, better health outcomes and lower costs are required to meet current and future healthcare needs in the ACT. The solutions that will fix healthcare lie in valuing the skills of the entire health workforce. Spending on physiotherapy will bring more value for money by reducing the need for costly secondary care.

Through Medicare Urgent Care Clinics and Minor Injury and Illness Clinics at satellite hospitals, we can test a new and more efficient pathway by having advanced practice physiotherapists work as primary care providers and first contact practitioners. This will provide faster access to diagnosis, treatment and care for patients with musculoskeletal pain and other conditions as well as reducing pressure on an already strained medical system.

Priority 2.1 | Put physiotherapy services in Urgent Care Clinics

**Action: Prioritise a publicly funded first contact physiotherapy service in Urgent Care Clinics and Minor Injury and Illness Clinics.**

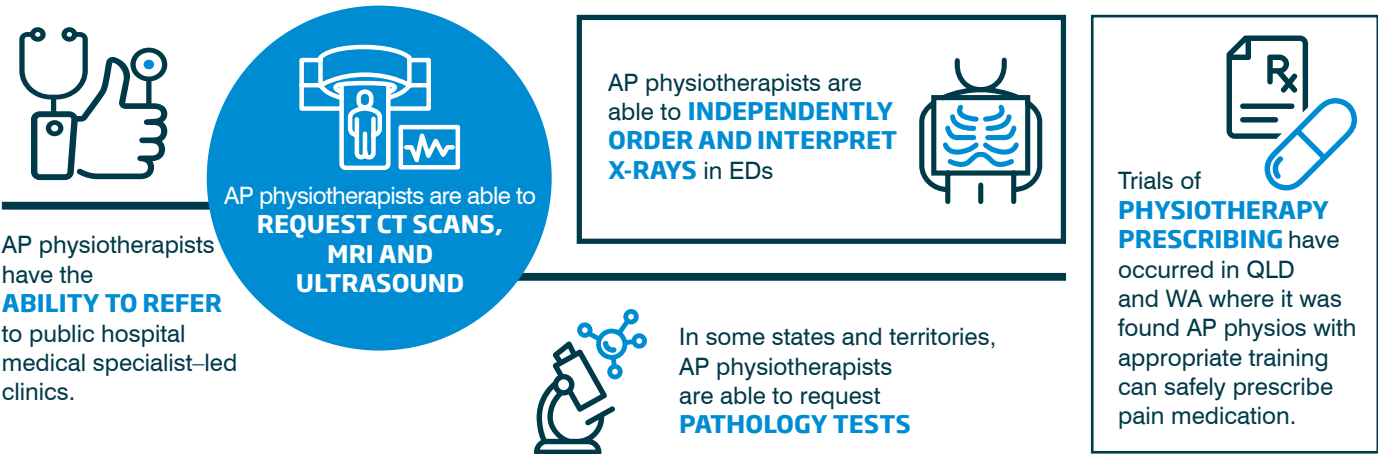
Physiotherapy is key to ensuring continuity of care across the primary and acute care interface. The practice can help alleviate the workloads of general practitioners by diverting non-life-threatening emergencies and keeping these types of patients out of the emergency department. Rolling out first contact physiotherapy in primary care settings will benefit patients and the health system. It will lead to cost savings and allow an overburdened health workforce to continue to provide high-quality patient care in response to increasing demands.

**Supporting physiotherapists to work at the top of their scope can address current inefficiencies in primary care and in the hospital sector.**

Advanced practice (AP) emergency department physiotherapists are already well embedded in the state public healthcare system nationally, providing a sustainable and highly skilled workforce base from which to expand services at this level.

Expanding this workforce can help meet unmet patient need at the primary and acute care interface, including the implementation of physiotherapists at the ACT nurse-led walk-in clinics. A significant proportion of the likely patient load in these clinics will be musculoskeletal conditions such as sprains, strains and spinal pain—conditions best managed by physiotherapists.

Physiotherapy roles require high levels of clinical expertise





## **Priority 2.2 | Create a more sustainable workforce by prioritising physiotherapy in hospitals and the community**

### **Action: Prioritise physiotherapy in the public hospital system.**

Physiotherapists play an important role in patient recovery. They facilitate a safe hospital discharge, reduce the length of a patient's stay and prevent hospital readmission. This frees up valuable health resources.

In response to ACT Health's most significant workforce challenges, there is a need to focus on supporting and retaining the current physiotherapy workforce, building and attracting new pipelines of talent and adapting and innovating to find new ways of delivering care. A continued investment will allow ACT Health to build a sustainable and supported physiotherapy workforce, resulting in the delivery of high-quality healthcare across the ACT.

## **Priority 2.3 | Support patient discharge and prevent hospital readmissions**

### **Action: Invest in community physiotherapy services.**

Community physiotherapy is an integral part of our public health system because these services support timely discharge and prevent readmission to hospital. However, community physiotherapy services are often heavily burdened, resulting in extended wait times and reduced access. Without access to community care, patients are at an increased risk of unsuccessful discharge and subsequent hospital readmission, increasing costs and placing a higher burden on hospitals.

## PRIORITY AREA THREE



### Support the physiotherapy profession in growing a **sustainable workforce**

Providing optimal care requires a sustainable physiotherapy workforce. Key to this is supportive training environments for students, along with targeted incentives that encourage physiotherapists to remain in the ACT. To bolster student support, prac payments, similar to what has recently been announced for nurses, teachers and social workers, are essential in ensuring that financial barriers do not hinder the educational journey. Additionally, offering payment incentives to private practices is crucial in facilitating high-quality clinical placements, which are vital for student training.

Beyond supporting students, there is a need to ensure that physiotherapists remain in the ACT. This requires robust incentives and clearly articulated career opportunities so that the workforce remains strong and capable of delivering the highest standard of care.

#### Priority 3.1 | Strengthen the physiotherapy workforce

**Action: Provide incentives and career opportunities to attract more physiotherapists to the ACT.**

To ensure that patients in the ACT receive the best possible healthcare, it is essential to have a sustainable health workforce that leverages the full scope of all professions, including physiotherapy. Strengthening the physiotherapy profession requires not only supporting and retaining the current workforce but also developing and attracting new talent pipelines. Implementing incentives similar to those in other states and territories could help retain physiotherapists in the ACT and attract professionals from across Australia.

Career progression opportunities are also vital for retaining and attracting professionals. Creating clear pathways for career advancement that enable physiotherapists to work to the top of their scope of practice is necessary to ensure the sustainability and growth of the physiotherapy workforce.

#### Priority 3.2 | Support clinical placements in private practice

**Action: Provide incentives to enable effective training opportunities in private practice.**

Private practice is becoming a common location for physiotherapy students to undertake clinical placements. Because physiotherapy is an autonomous profession and we are seeing an increasing number of graduates seeking employment in this setting, it is essential that these placements prepare them to enter the workforce. Unfortunately, current Medicare Benefits Schedule legislation prevents rebates from being paid for treatments that have student involvement. Many students are therefore limited to observing treatments because it isn't financially viable for practices to not receive treatment rebates. This limits the opportunities available for students to practise their clinical skills. The APA is seeking payment incentives for private practices to support them in providing clinical placements.

#### Priority 3.3 | Relieve placement poverty for those in the ACT

**Action: Support funded clinical placement positions such as those we have recently seen for teachers, nurses and social workers.**

Funding for student placements is needed to help build a sustainable workforce and to overcome placement poverty. The ability to commit to study and complete clinical placements presents a barrier to physiotherapy students in the ACT, who are often required to undertake placements interstate. This results in additional accommodation costs as well as being unable to continue their usual employment. The APA is calling for physiotherapy students to receive financial support during clinical placements similar to nursing, teaching and social work students.

## PRIORITY AREA FOUR



### Grow **advanced practice** physiotherapy roles in hospitals and community settings

Advanced practice physiotherapists hold high levels of clinical expertise to assess and independently manage specific patient cohorts. The APA calls for the ACT Government to develop new ways for advanced practice physiotherapists to deliver care across the health system. Advanced practice physiotherapy roles have been shown to manage healthcare demand in the ACT across a range of musculoskeletal and orthopaedic conditions. This not only improves patient outcomes but also significantly reduces wait times. It is proven to be safe, cost-effective and efficient.

Physiotherapists are a flexible and adaptable workforce and there are many who have been at the forefront of the advanced practice specialisation in the ACT for more than 15 years. Further utilisation of the skills and knowledge of this part of the workforce can improve the healthcare provided to those in the ACT.

#### Priority 4.1 | Further recognise advanced practice physiotherapy

##### **Action: Develop advanced practice physiotherapy roles to improve the patient journey.**

The APA is calling for further investment in developing advanced practice physiotherapy roles. This will ensure consistency in resourcing these roles across the health system, enabling the full potential of the workforce to be used. There are still barriers that prevent the skills held by advanced practice physiotherapists being recognised and used to their full potential.

Advanced practice physiotherapists use advanced skills to assess, diagnose and manage complex conditions. The new Allied Health Professionals award classification system provides further opportunities for advanced practice physiotherapists to excel and utilise their expertise.

#### Priority 4.2 | Triage and manage hospital specialist waiting lists

##### **Action: Increase investment in physiotherapy-led screening clinics across the health system including community-based services.**

For most musculoskeletal conditions, non-operative care is the most appropriate treatment. Advanced practice physiotherapists play a key role in the management of hospital specialist outpatient waiting lists by assessing and coordinating care pathways. Advanced practice physiotherapists have high levels of diagnostic agreement with their medical colleagues. Physiotherapy-led orthopaedic triage clinics are also seen as an effective alternative to usual care in the short, immediate and long term. These clinics are highly cost-effective and reduce the need for more hospital medical officers and specialists.

The orthopaedic triage clinic is an advanced practice physiotherapy-led model of care developed initially to address overburdened specialist orthopaedic outpatient public hospital services across the ACT.

The APA calls for sustained and increased funding for these innovative service delivery models, which address the rising demands on health services, ensuring that people receive the right care, at the right time, in the right place, with the right resources and by the right person.