



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION



Physiotherapy: A smart investment for a more efficient South Australian Health System

Invest in physiotherapy and put patients first. Together, we can shape a healthier future for South Australia.

**Australian Physiotherapy Association
2026 South Australia Election Priorities**

Invest in physiotherapy

A HEALTHIER STATE STARTS WITH PHYSIOTHERAPY

Ambulance ramping continues to expose the deep structural pressure within South Australia's health system. A significant share of this strain is driven by preventable demand, particularly musculoskeletal conditions, which affect one in three South Australians.^{1 2} Too many people are entering hospital pathways who could have been treated earlier, more effectively and at far lower cost through physiotherapy.³ This care also keeps people well, active and able to participate productively in their communities and the workforce.

South Australia has already laid important groundwork through the *Preventative Health SA Act 2024*, major system investments, workforce expansion and new models of care. The next step is to scale the interventions that directly reduce avoidable hospital demand. Physiotherapy remains one of the most reliable levers available, backed by clear, consistent evidence.

Physiotherapy-led assessment in emergency departments, urgent care diversion models such as the Bright Hospital back pain pathway and established acute and subacute services at Flinders Medical Centre and the Royal Adelaide Hospital all show consistent results. Earlier mobilisation, shorter stays and fewer unnecessary presentations are already being achieved within SA Health. The opportunity now is statewide implementation.

The next South Australian Government can build on this foundation. Scaling proven physiotherapy models across all Local Health Networks (LHNs) would strengthen multidisciplinary care, reduce pressure on high-cost emergency and surgical pathways and improve outcomes for patients across the state.

Priorities for the 2026 election

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is asking candidates to support five priorities that align with the state's prevention agenda and its goal of reducing pressure on hospitals.

We are calling on candidates for the 2026 South Australian election to support:



Integrate physiotherapy across patient pathways to reduce **avoidable hospital** demand.



Scale evidence-based, **non-surgical pathways** to reduce delays, improve quality of life and lower system costs.



Improve **women's healthcare** and deliver the Endometriosis Inquiry recommendations through physiotherapy.



Support a strong hospital **physiotherapy workforce** to improve system capacity.



Improve patient access to care in **rural communities** through state workforce incentives.

These priorities give the next South Australian Government a clear, evidence-based path to strengthen essential care, reduce avoidable system pressure and improve outcomes for communities across the state. By investing in physiotherapy, the state government can improve access to timely, effective care and reduce the financial strain created by delayed treatment and unnecessary escalation to high cost interventions.

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

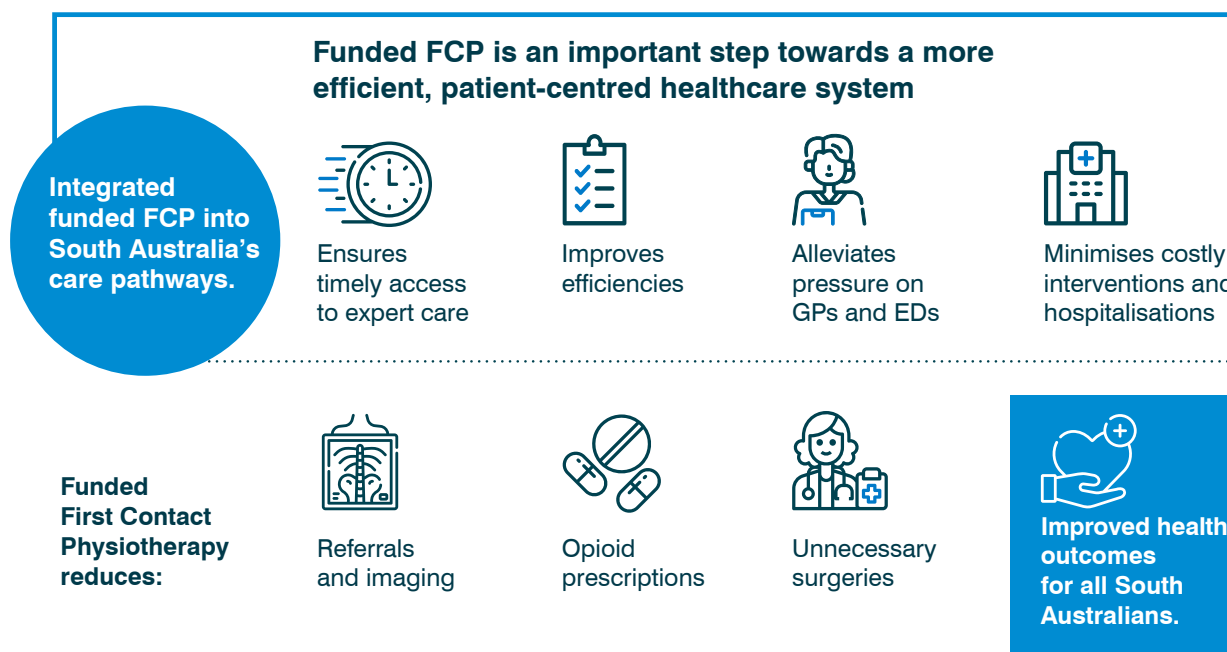
Physiotherapy delivers earlier intervention, faster recovery and fewer avoidable hospital presentations, directly easing pressure on South Australia’s emergency and inpatient services. Strengthening access to physiotherapy improves patient flow, reduces escalation to higher-cost parts of the system and supports priority populations who are disproportionately affected by delayed treatment including older people, those with chronic and complex conditions, women with unmet health needs, people living in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people with disability.

Physiotherapists identify early deterioration, restore mobility and stabilise common conditions before they escalate. Acute low back pain, minor falls, frailty-related decline and chronic disease flare-ups often begin as manageable issues but progress to emergency care when pain, balance or function are not addressed early. Physiotherapy provides the preventive care that maintains stability, reduces unnecessary imaging and keeps people safely in the community.

First Contact Physiotherapy

First Contact Physiotherapy is a proven model that places physiotherapists as the first point of clinical assessment for people presenting with musculoskeletal pain, mobility decline or functional deterioration.

Funded FCP delivers rapid assessment, early intervention and targeted management, reducing unnecessary imaging, preventing deterioration and diverting patients away from emergency and surgical pathways. It strengthens access to timely care, improves patient flow and supports the state’s broader prevention agenda.



The five priorities in this statement outline practical, evidence-based reforms that can streamline care, strengthen prevention and deliver high-value, financially sustainable services for South Australians.

PRIORITY 1



Integrate physiotherapy across patient pathways to reduce **avoidable hospital demand**

Physiotherapy is a proven, cost-effective intervention across the care continuum, yet it remains underutilised in key state-funded pathways. The South Australian Labor Government has invested in early-intervention and integrated-care initiatives – including Priority Care Centres, rapid access clinics, virtual care services such as the SA Virtual Care Service and the Child and Adolescent Virtual Urgent Care Service, and community-based chronic conditions programs – all designed to keep people well and reduce preventable hospital use. But physiotherapy is not consistently embedded within these models. This limits their impact and constrains the full potential of reforms aimed at reducing avoidable demand.

The opportunity ahead

Embedding physiotherapy across patient pathways would increase the effectiveness of the state's prevention agenda. Integrating physiotherapists into existing pathways and community rehabilitation services would strengthen multidisciplinary care, reduce pressure on emergency and surgical pathways and keep more South Australians well in the community.

The APA calls on the next South Australian Government to implement:

1.1 Physiotherapy-led early intervention and prevention.

Physiotherapy prevents deterioration, reduces falls, stabilises common conditions and avoids unnecessary admissions.^{4,5}

Our ask: embed funded First Contact Physiotherapy across state-commissioned pathways to deliver timely assessment and keep people well in the community.

1.2 Prehabilitation before surgery.

Prehabilitation improves surgical readiness, reduces postoperative complications, shortens recovery time and reduces the length of hospital stay, particularly for joint replacement patients.⁶

Our ask: embed physiotherapy-led pre-surgical rehabilitation across elective surgery pathways to improve outcomes and increase surgical throughput.

1.3 Outpatient and community physiotherapy.

Outpatient physiotherapy prevents decline during care transitions, maintains independence and reduces readmissions.⁷

Our ask: strengthen physiotherapy across community, ambulatory and integrated care pathways to prevent deterioration and reduce avoidable hospital demand.

1.4 Digital physiotherapy-led back pain pathways.

The CALHN BRIGHT Personify Back Pain Pathway supports patients diverted from emergency departments to self-manage back pain and access primary care. This physiotherapy-led digital model reduces unnecessary emergency department presentations, escalates care only when required and improves patient confidence in managing their condition.

Our ask: scale physiotherapy-led digital back pain pathways across all LHNs, including in regional areas, to reduce emergency department demand and improve access to conservative care.

1.5 Screening and early-intervention clinics.

Physiotherapy-led clinics manage knee and hip osteoarthritis, spinal pain, neurological conditions, continence issues and paediatric presentations early, preventing deterioration and reducing pressure on specialist and surgical pathways.^{8,9}

Our ask: fund physiotherapy-led screening and early-intervention clinics across community and outpatient settings to reduce avoidable hospital demand.

1.6 Thriving Kids.

Paediatric physiotherapists play a critical role in early identification and care for children with developmental delay.¹⁰ The Commonwealth's Thriving Kids initiative will expand supports for children under eight with developmental delay and/or autism.

Our ask: establish accessible state-funded physiotherapy services to ensure that children and families can access Thriving Kids supports from 1 October 2026.

PRIORITY 2



Scale evidence-based, **non-surgical pathways** that reduce delays, improve quality of life and lower system costs

Physiotherapists deliver evidence-based, non-surgical care for knee osteoarthritis, low back pain, chronic pain and falls risk. These conditions frequently start as low-complexity issues but become high-cost when not managed early. Evidence-based physiotherapy pathways reduce orthopaedic referrals, avoid low-value imaging and prevent surgery for patients who respond better to non-operative treatment. Scaling these models improves function, reduces disability and prevents escalation to high-acuity care.

The opportunity ahead

South Australia can significantly reduce avoidable demand by expanding physiotherapy-led non-surgical pathways across all LHNs. Proven models such as physiotherapy-led knee OA programs^{11 12 13}, early intervention for low back pain^{14 15}, chronic pain clinics and targeted falls prevention pathways¹⁶ deliver earlier assessment, stabilise symptoms and keep patients out of emergency and surgical queues. Strengthening these services improves quality of life, reduces disability and lowers system costs by diverting patients away from high-cost, low-value care.

The APA calls on the next South Australian Government to:

2.1 Implement statewide physiotherapy-led non-surgical pathways across all LHNs.

Consistent non-surgical pathways reduce unwarranted variation, improve patient flow and keep people out of high-cost emergency and surgical care.

Our ask: establish funded, statewide physiotherapy-led non-surgical pathways across all LHNs to ensure consistent access and reduce avoidable demand.

This includes:

- › Expanding physiotherapy-led **knee osteoarthritis** pathways to reduce unnecessary specialist surgical referrals and delay or prevent surgery.
- › Strengthening early-intervention pathways for **low back pain** across emergency, urgent care and community settings.
- › Investing in physiotherapy-led **chronic pain clinics** to reduce opioid reliance and prevent repeated hospital presentations.
- › Scaling physiotherapy-led **falls prevention programs** to reduce injuries and cut hospital admissions.

2.2 Embed physiotherapists in medical specialist outpatient clinics.

Physiotherapists in specialist clinics such as chronic pain services improve assessment, reduce unnecessary imaging and support evidence-based conservative management. Embedding physiotherapists in these pathways improves access, shortens wait times and helps avoid high-risk pharmacological, interventional and surgical procedures by offering low-risk, evidence-based alternatives. This approach not only prevents escalation to invasive care but also reduces overall healthcare and broader societal costs.

Our ask: embed physiotherapists in specialist outpatient clinics, including chronic pain services, to strengthen conservative care and reduce pressure on surgical pathways.

PRIORITY 3



Improve **women's healthcare** and deliver the endometriosis inquiry recommendations through physiotherapy

Improving access to multidisciplinary care for the one in seven South Australian women affected by endometriosis will improve quality of life and reduce hospitalisations and ED presentations. Physiotherapy is a proven treatment for endometriosis-related pelvic pain, pelvic floor dysfunction and associated symptoms, with strong evidence supporting its role in multidisciplinary care.¹⁷ The APA acknowledges the work of the South Australia Parliamentary Select Committee into Endometriosis and urges the government to recognise physiotherapy as essential to implementing its recommendations.

The opportunity ahead

South Australia can strengthen women's healthcare by embedding physiotherapy within multidisciplinary endometriosis pathways, expanding access to specialised clinics and ensuring that clinical expertise informs implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations. Doing so will improve early intervention, reduce escalation to higher-acuity care and deliver more equitable access to evidence-based treatment across the state.

The APA calls on the next South Australian Government to:

3.1 Expand the Endometriosis and Pelvic Pain GP Clinic network.

Expanding the current two-site network will increase access to specialised care and reduce delays for women seeking diagnosis and treatment.

Our ask: work with the Commonwealth to expand the Endometriosis and Pelvic Pain GP Clinic network to additional locations across South Australia.

3.2 Fund physiotherapy within multidisciplinary endometriosis care.

The Inquiry identifies multidisciplinary care as best practice. Physiotherapy is central to managing pelvic pain, improving function and reducing reliance on imaging, opioids and surgical pathways.

Our ask: embed funded physiotherapy roles within endometriosis clinics to support delivery of best-practice, multidisciplinary care.

3.3 Include physiotherapy representation on the SA Health working group.

Implementing the Inquiry's recommendations requires coordinated planning and clinical expertise. Physiotherapy representation ensures evidence-based models of care are adopted and sustained.

Our ask: include physiotherapy representation on the SA Health working group responsible for implementing the Endometriosis Inquiry recommendations.

PRIORITY 4



Support a strong hospital physiotherapy workforce to improve system capacity

Physiotherapists are essential to acute and subacute care. They support early mobilisation, reduce complications, shorten length of stay and prevent avoidable admissions. Their work improves patient flow, reduces readmissions and enables safe, timely discharge – all core pressures across South Australia’s hospital system. Increasing physiotherapy positions across inpatient, emergency and urgent care settings and expanding advanced practice roles will strengthen multidisciplinary care and improve outcomes statewide.

The opportunity ahead

A stronger hospital physiotherapy workforce will improve recovery after surgery, maintain mobility in medically complex patients and prevent the deconditioning that prolongs hospital stays. Advanced practice physiotherapists in emergency, urgent care and orthopaedic screening reduce unnecessary imaging, avoid low-value specialist referrals and manage musculoskeletal presentations more efficiently.^{18 19 20} Expanding these roles frees up beds, improves flow and increases system capacity.

The APA calls on the next South Australian Government to:

4.1 Increase physiotherapy staffing across acute, subacute and emergency settings.

More physiotherapists in hospitals improves mobilisation, reduces complications and supports safe, timely discharge.

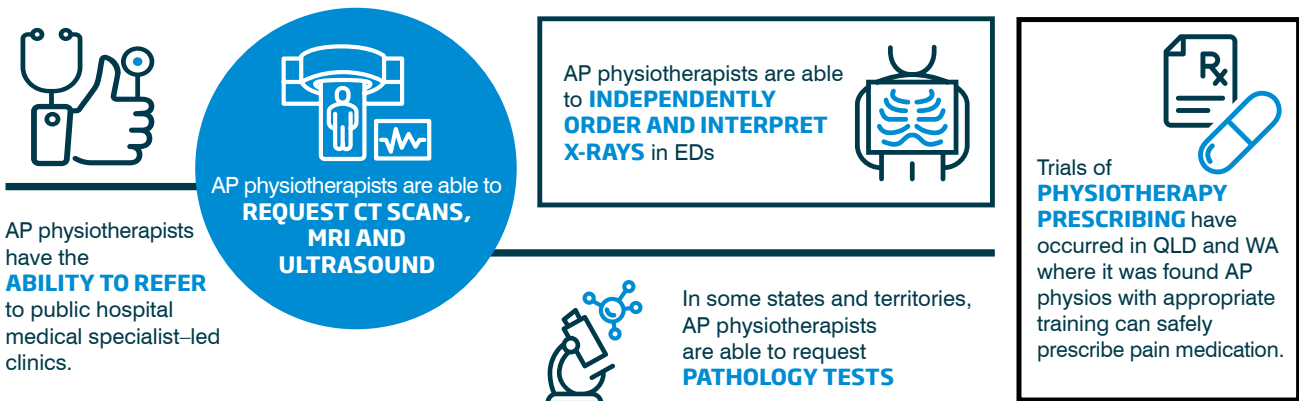
Our ask: strengthen the hospital physiotherapy workforce to improve patient flow, recovery and overall system capacity.

4.2 Expand advanced practice physiotherapy roles in emergency and outpatient pathways.

Advanced practice physiotherapists already operate successfully at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Flinders Medical Centre, providing timely assessment and management of musculoskeletal presentations in emergency settings and in other select areas (spinal, neurosurgery and rheumatology). Expanding these roles into northern and southern growth areas (and beyond current select areas to include other medical specialities such as orthopaedics) would improve access for rapidly growing populations and relieve pressure on emergency departments. These clinicians manage high-volume presentations such as sprains, strains and spinal pain effectively, reducing unnecessary imaging and specialist referrals and improving patient flow.

Our ask: embed and expand advanced practice physiotherapy roles across emergency departments, urgent care services and orthopaedic screening pathways, including in northern and southern growth areas, to improve access, reduce bottlenecks and strengthen system capacity.

Advanced Practice (AP) physiotherapy roles require high levels of clinical expertise



PRIORITY 5



Improve patient access to care in **rural communities** through state workforce incentives

Rural South Australians face long waits, long travel distances and have limited access to physiotherapy, leading to missed treatment, avoidable hospital admissions and poorer recovery. Physiotherapists in rural settings provide early fracture care, musculoskeletal assessment, falls prevention and chronic disease support that prevent minor issues from becoming complex presentations. A stable rural physiotherapy workforce keeps people well in their communities and reduces preventable hospital use.

The opportunity ahead

South Australia can improve access and reduce pressure on rural hospitals by investing in a sustainable physiotherapy workforce. One-third of physiotherapists are willing to work rurally, particularly early-career clinicians, but require financial support to relocate. A targeted state incentive program, supported by a broader rural allied health workforce strategy, would attract and retain physiotherapists in regional communities and address longstanding gaps in access to care.

The APA calls on the next South Australian Government to:

5.1 Provide incentives to attract physiotherapists to regional South Australia.

Rural communities experience significant shortages in physiotherapy services, resulting in delayed care and avoidable hospital presentations. A well-designed state incentive program is needed as the federal Workforce Incentive Program has not supported physiotherapists effectively.

Our ask: introduce targeted state incentives to attract and retain physiotherapists in rural South Australia and address unmet need.

5.2 Develop a rural allied health workforce strategy.

A coordinated strategy is needed to guide recruitment, retention and career development for physiotherapists in rural South Australia. Similar to the Central Adelaide LHN Allied Health Workforce Plan, a statewide approach would support long-term workforce sustainability.

Our ask: develop and implement a rural allied health workforce strategy to build a sustainable physiotherapy workforce and improve access to care across regional South Australia.

About the APA

The APA is the national peak body for physiotherapy, representing more than 35,000 members across Australia. We advocate for the profession across the full care continuum, ensuring that physiotherapy is recognised and influential in national policy, reform and system design.

Our purpose is to champion excellence in physiotherapy and ensure that every Australian can access high-quality, evidence-based care when and where it is needed. We work to strengthen the profession's identity, demonstrate its impact and advance physiotherapy's contribution to prevention, recovery and lifelong health.

Our membership, education programs and professional networks support physiotherapists at every career stage to stay connected, informed and ready for the future. We invest in leadership development, advanced skills and continuous professional growth to build a capable and confident workforce.

The APA is a national organisation with state and territory branches and a governance structure led by a board of directors elected from across the profession. We are committed to strong governance, collaboration and accountability in everything we do.

We are proud to represent a profession that plays a critical role in modernising Australia's health system and delivering better care across the life span.



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