

AUSTRALIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION

Physiotherapy: a high return investment in a healthier Victoria

Invest in proven, cost-effective care to keep Victorians well and relieve pressure on hospitals

Australian Physiotherapy Association
2026 Victorian Election Priorities

A healthier Victoria starts with physiotherapy

Victoria's health system is under sustained pressure from rising demand, increasingly complex patient needs, and workforce and financial constraints.

Too many Victorians are entering emergency departments, hospitals and surgical pathways when earlier access to physiotherapy could prevent deterioration, restore function and support effective care in the community.

Victoria needs affordable, high-impact solutions that reduce avoidable demand, deliver care in less resource-intensive settings and preserve hospital capacity for patients with the greatest clinical need.

Physiotherapy is one of the most effective levers available. Timely access can help Victorians stay well, maintain their independence, avoid unnecessary hospital and surgical care, and receive treatment closer to home.

Priorities for the 2026 election

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) recommends the following five low-cost, high-return priorities to improve the health of Victorians and relieve health system pressure.



Prevent falls and keep older Victorians out of hospital: Establish a statewide, physiotherapy-led falls prevention program



Reduce avoidable demand for **hip and knee surgery:** Provide universal access to physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis management



Give Victorian children the **best start** through physiotherapy: Embed physiotherapy as a core component of Victoria's Thriving Kids model



Reduce pressure on hospitals through **advanced practice** physiotherapy: Expand physiotherapy-led care in emergency departments and improve access to community-based physiotherapy



Grow the **physiotherapy workforce** to better support underserved Victorians: invest in growing the physiotherapy workforce for women's health and people living in regional communities.

Together, these priorities provide the next Victorian Government with a practical, evidence-based pathway to reduce avoidable system pressure and improve outcomes for communities across the state.

PRIORITY 1



Prevent falls and keep older Victorians out of hospital: Establish a statewide, physiotherapy-led falls prevention program

Falls are one of the largest avoidable injury burdens on hospitals, accounting for:

- 72 per cent of injury-related hospital admissions
- 53 per cent of injury-related emergency department presentations
- an estimated national health system burden of $1.4 billion per year, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Falls prevention has the potential to realise significant system-wide savings because it targets a costly and preventable driver of emergency department demand, hospital admissions, hip fractures, rehabilitation, long stays and aged care entry.

Physiotherapy-led falls programs are a high-value intervention, reducing falls by 24 per cent in the community and 55 per cent in residential aged care. It is one of the clearest opportunities to harness physiotherapy to reduce downstream health costs.[1,2]

The opportunity ahead

While Victoria has falls and balance programs in hospitals and community health services, there is an opportunity to build on existing infrastructure by creating a more systematic, consistently funded falls prevention pathway.

This would address the long waiting lists and care access barriers, particularly for older Victorians in rural and regional areas.

A coordinated statewide approach would identify risk earlier, improve access to proven interventions and reduce avoidable emergency department presentations, hospital admissions, extended hospital stays and premature entry into aged care.

The APA calls on the next Victorian Government to:

Fund a statewide, physiotherapy-led falls prevention program for older Victorians at risk of hospitalisation, comprising:

1.1 Physiotherapy-led frailty and falls-risk screening

Introduce physiotherapy-led frailty and falls-risk screening in general practice, community health and other settings regularly accessed by older Victorians.

Our ask: introduce funded, physiotherapy-led frailty and falls-risk screening in primary care and other settings regularly accessed by older Victorians.

1.2 Strength and balance programs

Physiotherapy-led falls programs reduce falls by 24 per cent in the community and 55 per cent in residential aged care. Strength and balance programs can help older Victorians maintain their mobility, independence and confidence.[1,2]

Our ask: fund accessible strength and balance programs, including digital options for rural Victorians, people facing transport barriers and those transitioning from rehabilitation.

1.3 Physiotherapy in care-closer-to-home programs

Embedding physiotherapy in care-closer-to-home programs would support earlier intervention, improve recovery and help prevent avoidable hospital presentations and readmissions.

Our ask: embed physiotherapy more consistently within Residential in Reach, Hospital in the Home and other Victorian care-closer-to-home programs.

PRIORITY 2



Reduce avoidable demand for **hip and knee surgery:** Provide universal access to physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis management

Osteoarthritis is one of Victoria's most costly chronic conditions and a major driver of:

- elective hip and knee replacement surgery
- pressure on Victoria's planned-surgery waiting list
- demand for rehabilitation and community health services.

Australian modelling estimates that structured education and exercise therapy for selected people with knee osteoarthritis could save the health system around $100 million annually by reducing demand for surgery.[3]

Physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis programs are a high-value intervention. Expanding access will help ensure surgery is reserved for patients most likely to benefit, while improving the return on Victoria's existing hospital investment.

The opportunity ahead

Victoria already has strong foundations for osteoarthritis care through the Osteoarthritis Hip and Knee Service, advanced practice physiotherapy clinics and community health services. However, access remains fragmented and depends too heavily on referral pathways, local service availability, eligibility requirements and capacity to pay.

Australian Government data for 2023-24 indicate that private knee replacement typically costs approximately $23,200, including $5,200 in specialist fees and $18,000 in hospital fees.

A statewide, funded osteoarthritis management package would guarantee timely and affordable care for Victorians at risk of surgical referral. By building on existing infrastructure, this comparatively low-cost reform could improve equity, support earlier intervention and reduce avoidable demand for surgery.

The APA calls on the next Victorian Government to:

Fund universal access to physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis management for Victorians with hip or knee osteoarthritis at risk of surgical referral, comprising:

2.1 Improved access to advanced practice physiotherapy

Streamline access to advanced practice physiotherapy clinics for Victorians, regardless of where they live or the pathway through which they enter the health system.

Our ask: increase osteoarthritis-specific advanced practice physiotherapy clinics for specialist assessment, triage and pathway coordination.

2.2 Universal access to fully funded, longitudinal physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis management

Structured education and exercise therapy can reduce pain, improve function and help people manage osteoarthritis without surgery. Providing access to a complete course of treatment would help ensure surgery is reserved for patients most likely to benefit.

Our ask: deliver physiotherapy-led osteoarthritis management through Local Health Service Networks and existing hospital and community-based services.

PRIORITY 3



Give Victorian children the **best start** through physiotherapy: Embed physiotherapy as a core component of Victoria's Thriving Kids model

The Victorian Government has committed $360 million over five years to Thriving Kids, matched by a $360 million Commonwealth contribution, bringing the combined investment in Victorian-delivered services to $720 million.

A well-implemented Thriving Kids program has the potential to reduce longer-term health and disability costs by identifying developmental concerns earlier, improving children's functional capacity and reducing the escalation of support needs. Realising these benefits will depend on timely access to evidence-based allied health and family supports, supported by adequate workforce capacity.

Research indicates that the greatest opportunity to influence developmental outcomes occurs during the first 1000 days, when neuroplasticity is greatest.[4]

Physiotherapists are trained to assess neurological, musculoskeletal, respiratory and functional development, identify movement differences and determine whether early intervention or further investigation is required. Without timely access to physiotherapy, developmental concerns can go unrecognised, delaying referral and appropriate care.

The opportunity ahead

To ensure that all Victorian children have access to the most effective care and that the full benefit of the $720 million investment is realised, physiotherapy within the first 1000 days must be included as a key plank of Victoria's Thriving Kids program.

The APA calls on the next Victorian Government to:

Embed physiotherapy as a core component of Victoria's Thriving Kids model, comprising:

3.1 A central role for physiotherapy in Thriving Kids

Physiotherapists have unique skills in the early identification of development delay and delivery of effective interventions and should form a core part of the Thriving Kids delivery framework in Victoria.

Our ask: define physiotherapy's role in early identification, assessment and intervention within Victoria's Thriving Kids model.

3.2 Physiotherapy within the Maternal and Child Health Program

Victoria's universal Maternal and Child Health Program provides an established platform to identify developmental concerns early and connect children and families with appropriate supports.

Our ask: use Victoria's existing universal Maternal and Child Health Program as the primary platform to deliver Thriving Kids and expand the screening team to include paediatric physiotherapy practitioners and utilise existing community health paediatric physiotherapists.

3.3 Statewide access and referral pathways

Clear referral pathways and effective use of the existing physiotherapy workforce would improve access to early intervention for children across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria.

Our ask: establish referral pathways and utilise existing pathways across maternal and child health, primary care and early childhood services, harnessing the existing physiotherapy workforce across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

PRIORITY 4



Reduce pressure on hospitals through **advanced practice** physiotherapy

Musculoskeletal conditions account for more than 1.3 million emergency department presentations annually, representing approximately 15 per cent of all presentations across Australia.[5]

Expanding advanced practice physiotherapy in emergency departments is a high-value workforce reform. It can reduce overcrowding, avoid unnecessary admissions and ease pressure on the medical workforce, without requiring major new infrastructure or significant increases in medical staffing.

The opportunity ahead

Physiotherapist-led models of care in emergency departments reduce length of stay among patients presenting with uncomplicated musculoskeletal conditions, without compromising health outcomes or safety.[6,7,8]

A major Australian randomised controlled trial found that physiotherapist-led care for selected musculoskeletal presentations reduced emergency department costs by an average of $35 per patient, reduced average length of stay one hour and had a 98 per cent probability of being cost-effective.[9]

The opportunity for Victoria is a targeted, independently evaluated expansion of advanced practice physiotherapy. Physiotherapists could be deployed during periods of high musculoskeletal demand and credentialed to undertake primary-contact assessment and discharge.

The APA calls on the next Victorian Government to:

Expand advanced practice physiotherapy across Victoria's emergency departments and strengthen pathways to community-based physiotherapy, comprising:

4.1 Emergency Physiotherapy Practitioner model

Advanced practice physiotherapists can assess, treat and discharge suitable patients presenting with musculoskeletal conditions, reducing waiting times, while allowing medical staff to focus on more complex cases.[6,7,8]

Our ask: adopt an Emergency Physiotherapy Practitioner model with dedicated funding, credentialing, clinical governance and regional workforce incentives.

4.2 Diversion to community physiotherapy

Suitable patients can be safely diverted from hospitals and urgent care clinics to timely physiotherapy in the community, reducing pressure on acute services and supporting recovery closer to home.

Our ask: trial a defined community physiotherapy care package (voucher system) with clear eligibility, no patient co-payment and measurable outcomes.

PRIORITY 5



Grow the **physiotherapy workforce** to better support underserved Victorians: invest in growing the physiotherapy workforce for women's health and people living in regional communities.

Growing Victoria's physiotherapy workforce will reduce demand for expensive hospital care, improve patient flow and free doctors, nurses and surgeons to treat more complex patients. Targeted workforce investment is needed to build physiotherapy capability in priority areas of care and improve access for all communities.

The opportunity ahead

Victoria can make better use of its physiotherapy workforce by developing capability in areas of growing demand and supporting physiotherapists to train, work and remain in rural and regional communities.

Targeted investment in skills development, education and regional workforce pathways would improve access to evidence-based care while strengthening Victoria's broader health workforce.

The APA calls on the next Victorian Government to:

Build Victoria's physiotherapy capability in priority areas of care and underserved communities, comprising:

5.1 Women's health skill acquisition pathway

Improving access to multidisciplinary care for the one in seven Victorian women affected by endometriosis will improve quality of life and reduce hospitalisations and emergency department presentations. This would also support implementation of the recommendations in the *Bridging the Gender Pain Gap: Inquiry into Women's Pain Report 2025* regarding development of a specialist clinical and allied health workforce.[10]

Our ask: establish a funded skill acquisition pathway to build physiotherapy capability in women's health.

5.2 Rural and regional workforce

Rural and regional Victorians face significant barriers to accessing physiotherapy care due to workforce shortages.

Our ask: establish targeted rural and regional physiotherapy workforce incentive programs, including:

- regional student placements, graduate pathways, professional supervision and retention incentives
- an extension of the Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy Student Grants program to include physiotherapy students
- targeted investment in areas of demonstrated workforce shortage and measurement of long-term retention, not only recruitment.

About the APA

The APA is the national peak body for physiotherapy, representing more than 37,000 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 lifespan.



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