Physical therapist support personnel

The World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) advocates that policies for using physical therapist support personnel have to be determined at a national level. Physical therapy is an internationally recognised health profession. It may be practised only by qualified and, where required by state or national legislation, duly licensed/registered physical therapists. WCPT advocates that where physical therapist support personnel are utilised, direction and supervision from a physical therapist are essential in the provision of quality physical therapy services. The degree of direction and supervision necessary for assuring quality physical therapy services is dependent upon many factors, including the education, experiences, and responsibilities of the parties involved, the needs of the patient/client and the organisational structure in which the physical therapy services are provided.

WCPT acknowledges the different stances held by member organisations about the employment of support personnel, including the fact that member organisations may not support the employment of physical therapist support personnel in direct patient/client physical therapy services.

The term support personnel is used in a generic sense to encompass a range of employment classifications, such as physical therapist assistant, physical therapist aide, physical therapist technician or physical therapist helper.

Where physical therapist support personnel are employed, WCPT advocates that member organisations should ensure that:

- support personnel (assistant, aide, technician, or helper) be referred to as only “physical therapist assistant, physical therapist aide, physical therapist technician or physical therapist helper and not physical therapy assistant, aide, technician or helper
- physical therapist support personnel only assist the physical therapist in administration of physical therapist selected interventions/treatment and only in a properly conducted physical therapy service under the direction and supervision of the physical therapist
- supervision of physical therapist support personnel by the physical therapist requires that the physical therapist is preferably physically present and immediately available
- the physical therapy profession is actively involved in human resource discussions, decisions and policy changes concerning the potential use of physical therapy support personnel and their roles and required competencies
- they use effective consumer and marketing policies to assure that employers, governments and the community understand that such support personnel do not replace a qualified physical therapist
- the scope of work for physical therapist support personnel must be clearly identified to ensure compliance with state or national legislation/regulation/recognition
- physical therapist support personnel are adequately trained to perform effectively and safely any direct intervention/treatment that the member organisation has deemed within the province of a physical therapist to delegate
services employing physical therapist support personnel ensure they are always clearly identified so that the patient/client is not in doubt that the person is not a physical therapist

the ethical principles guiding the conduct of physical therapists should contain specific reference to the proper use of physical therapist support personnel in direct patient/client intervention/treatment.\(^1\)\(^2\)

WCPT advocates that, regardless of the setting in which the physical therapy service is provided, the following responsibilities must be carried out solely by the physical therapist and may not be delegated to physical therapist support personnel:

interpreting referrals when available

performing the patient/client examination/assessment, evaluating the data from the examination/assessment, establishing the diagnosis and prognosis/plan, and providing interventions/treatments that should not be delegated

developing or modifying the plan that is based on the initial examination/assessment or re-examination and that includes the physical therapy anticipated goals and expected outcomes

determining when the expertise and decision-making capability of the physical therapist requires the physical therapist to personally provide the intervention/treatment and when it may be appropriate to utilise the physical therapist support personnel

determining the most appropriate utilisation of the physical therapist support personnel that provides for the delivery of a service that is safe, effective and efficient

re-examining the patient/client in light of their goals, revising the plan when indicated and implementing those interventions that should not be delegated

establishing the discharge plan and documenting the discharge summary

**Glossary**

**Support personnel** — a generic term to encompass a range of employment classifications such as:

- physical therapist assistant
- physical therapist aide
- physical therapist technician
- physical therapist helper

Support personnel function only in a properly conducted physical therapy service under the direction and supervision of a physical therapist when implementing direct intervention/treatment programmes.

**Physical therapy** — services for individuals and populations to develop, maintain and restore maximum movement and functional ability throughout the lifespan. Physical therapy is described more comprehensively in WCPT’s ‘Description of Physical Therapy’.\(^3\) The professional title and term used to describe the profession’s practice varies and depends largely on the historical roots of the profession in each country. The most generally used titles and terms are ‘physical therapy’, ‘physiotherapy’ and ‘physical therapist’, ‘physiotherapist’.\(^4\)
### Approval, review and related policy information

| **Date adopted:** | Originally approved at the 13th General Meeting of WCPT June 1995.  
Revised and re-approved at the 16th General Meeting of WCPT June 2007.  
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| **Date for review:** | 2019 |
| **Related WCPT policies:** | WCPT ethical principles  
WCPT policy statements:  
- Description of physical therapy  
- Ethical responsibilities of physical therapists and WCPT members  
- Health human resources  
- Relationships with other health professionals  
- Regulation of the physical therapy profession  
WCPT guideline:  
- WCPT guideline for the development of a system of legislation/regulation/recognition of physical therapists |

### References


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