

## Business (Un)usual

**November 13, 2020**

In recent weeks, Albertans have seen alarming trends in the number of new COVID-19 infections occurring in Alberta, hospitalizations, and admissions to intensive care units. We have also heard much about COVID-19 fatigue and the real challenge of continuing to adhere to public health guidance and orders related to precautions such as mask wearing, restricting gathering sizes and staying home when even mildly ill.

To date, Physiotherapy Alberta knows of no outbreaks that have been tied to physiotherapy service delivery in any sector, and that is really good news. It suggests that physiotherapists have been adhering to the directions provided regarding PPE, cleaning and disinfecting, patient and staff screening and other changes to how services are delivered. However, it has also been identified that there is a high proportion of cases where the source of the infection has not or cannot be identified.

This should concern us all.

The risks of providing in-person health services within this context must be recognized. With numbers rising, and the spread of infection becoming such that the source cannot be consistently traced, Alberta is entering dangerous territory. It is time for all of us to double down on our efforts and contributions to contain the spread of COVID-19.

### **What does that mean?**

#### **Comply with targeted health measures**

On November 12 Dr. Hinshaw and Premier Kenney announced new targeted public health measures in effect on November 13 - 27. While most of the measures do not affect physiotherapy practice, the ban on indoor group exercise classes may have led to some confusion among physiotherapists who deliver exercise-based health interventions to groups of patients.

The new measure [bans high intensity cardiovascular group exercise](#) classes and team sport activities. Low-intensity, non-aerobic activities are not included in the ban, however group classes that fall into this category must include no more than 5 people including the instructor.

Physiotherapy Alberta's perspective is that this ban does not restrict physiotherapy services that employ group-based exercise programming as the services provided by a physiotherapist are health services and are subject to rigorous measures already in place to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19 in these settings.

However, physiotherapists should take note of the rationale for the new restriction which includes the risk of spread due to the level of exertion of participants and due to mixing and mingling of participants before or after class. Physiotherapists should review and refine the measures they have in place and intensity of the exercises completed to reduce these risks.

Physiotherapists are also advised to limit class sizes, ensuring appropriate physical distancing between participants, dedicated equipment for each participant, and reducing instructor close contact with and movement between participants.

## **Telerehabilitation**

Infection prevention and control measures are in place to limit the spread of COVID-19, but no measure is perfect, and some risks remain when services are provided in-person. Every close contact that a physiotherapist has with another person is another opportunity for the physiotherapist to become exposed to COVID-19 and to subsequently become a vector for virus spread. In addition, every visit to the practice setting necessitates countless contacts with other members of the public as the patient travels to and from their appointment. The risks posed by in-person services increase when physiotherapists work with patients more likely to experience severe outcomes from COVID-19.

Physiotherapists adopted telerehabilitation rapidly in response to the restrictions on in-person services that were in place in the spring. As re-opening occurred, its use declined significantly. In light of the current situation, physiotherapists are encouraged to:

- Complete a point of care risk assessment
- Consider telerehabilitation as the means of service delivery when indicated by the patient's condition and the risk assessment
- Adopt blended models of service delivery using telerehabilitation visits to augment judicious use of in-person care as appropriate, all with the ultimate aim of achieving the best patient outcomes possible within this very challenging context of practice

Physiotherapists should continue to employ telerehabilitation to the greatest extent practicable to achieve desired patient outcomes and protect patients, themselves and others in the practice environment from exposure to the virus.

## **Infection prevention and control**

Physiotherapists are probably sick and tired of hearing about infection prevention and control. Many may reasonably feel that they understand this aspect of prevention well and are adhering to the requirements established by Physiotherapy Alberta.

However, human nature tells us that over time adherence to any new or challenging practice wanes. The rigorous cleaning and disinfecting protocols, screening practices and PPE requirements put in place to enable re-opening are exactly that – new, challenging, and an interruption to usual business practices.

These same practices are THE key enabler to allow physiotherapy practices to remain open and have helped us to avoid an outbreak tied to a physiotherapy practice setting.

No measure is perfect, and as an organization we know that the human factors, including the very real COVID fatigue many of us are experiencing, are often a key contributor to gaps in the safety system. With that in mind, Physiotherapy Alberta is calling on all physiotherapists to review the [guidance document](#) published in May and the [Infection Prevention and Control Visual Guide](#) again. Check the recommendations against your current practice, identify any gaps or areas where complacency may have set in, and commit to improving in even one aspect of the administrative, elimination, engineered or personal measures in place to keep everyone safe.

## **Keep COVID Out**

Dr. Hinshaw has recently commented on another alarming trend – the number of people who have reported being at work or social gatherings while symptomatic and later test positive for COVID-19. Attending work while even mildly ill is not acceptable. It runs counter to the interest of public safety, the CMOH orders in effect, and the directions of Physiotherapy Alberta. Physiotherapists and physiotherapy business owners must continue in their efforts to screen staff and patients who are entering the practice setting, to ensure that those with symptoms, a history of unprotected close contact with a case of COVID-19 or recent travel do not enter the practice setting.

Recently we have heard from many clinicians who have questions about the [Alberta COVID-19 Border Testing Pilot Program](#). Physiotherapy Alberta wishes to make sure that all registrants are aware that individuals participating in the program must not attend [high-risk workplaces](#) or visit people who are at high risk of more severe disease. Participants in the program are explicitly prohibited from working at or visiting

*“any setting where health care services are provided and there are vulnerable people at risk for severe disease for 14 days. This includes:*

- *All outpatient clinics*
- *Acute care*
- *Continuing care*
- *Long term care*
- *Seniors lodges”*

Physiotherapy Alberta has heard from some registrants who have expressed uncertainty about whether participants in the program may enter private practice setting or other clinical environments.

**The answer is no.**

### **What if I test positive for COVID-19?**

On November 5, 2020 Dr. Hinshaw reported that due to high case numbers, AHS contact tracing resources were being overwhelmed. She reported that in specific instances organizations may be called upon to complete contact tracing calls, notifying individuals that they have been in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19.

However, it has been confirmed that Alberta Health Services will continue to contact close contacts of cases of COVID-19 in [three priority groups](#), including

- Health care workers
- Minors
- Those living or working within congregate or communal facilities

As such, a physiotherapist who tests positive for COVID-19 should expect to be contacted by AHS contact tracers. In the interval between receiving a positive test result and being contacted, the physiotherapist should gather the necessary information to facilitate contact tracing efforts (names and

phone numbers of all close contacts, information about measures in use during direct patient care, and information regarding onset of symptoms if applicable).

**Physiotherapists must participate in contact tracing and comply with the directions of contact tracers.**

#### **Working as a contact tracer or in a testing centre**

Physiotherapists are also being called upon to help with the pandemic in other ways, by working as contact tracers or in COVID-19 testing centers. As the health system continues to be challenged by the burden of COVID-19, working in these non-traditional areas of practice can help to fill staffing gaps created by illness and isolation requirements and help to free up staff needed to work in other areas.

Physiotherapy Alberta's position is that duly trained physiotherapists can fulfill these roles and in doing so can leverage their fundamental communication, patient management and critical thinking skills. Although these roles differ from the traditional work of physiotherapists, they lever our knowledge, skills and attitudes to make a meaningful difference to the health system during a time of crisis and fit within the definition of what constitutes physiotherapy. For those seeking work, Physiotherapy Alberta encourages you to consider these work opportunities.