



## Position Statement Physiotherapists in Primary Health-Care Teams

### Our Position

Physiotherapy Alberta supports strengthening Albertans' access to multi-disciplinary primary care teams. Primary health care provides first contact services to patients and the coordination of their care to ensure continuity and ease of movement across the health-care continuum.<sup>1</sup> Alberta's 5-year action plan proposes increased use of other health professionals in primary care teams and improving the management of chronic, complex conditions through integrated, comprehensive care. Physiotherapists are health-care professionals who can deliver primary care in health promotion, prevention and screening, triaging, and treatment for a range of conditions affecting the movement and mobility of Albertans.

### Background

Access to primary health-care teams is an important strategy for ensuring Albertans' health needs are met by the right person, in the right place, at the right time. In primary health care, a team of health-care professionals work together to deliver care based on local community/population health needs. It goes beyond the traditional 'sick care' model (i.e., physician diagnosis and treatment of illness) by incorporating prevention, health promotion and chronic disease management. The key to effective, efficient primary health-care teams is to make better use of other health professionals. The result is enhanced, coordinated and timely patient care.

### Physiotherapists in Primary Health-Care Teams

Physiotherapists are health-care professionals with skills to manage many conditions seen in primary health-care settings. They can:

- Assess, screen, triage, and treat various acute medical/health conditions (e.g., MSK issues, back/neck pain, whiplash, arthritis, joint replacement rehabilitation, tendonitis, ergonomic, and other movement and mobility issues).
- Participate in chronic disease management by designing appropriate activity/rehabilitation programs for chronic conditions (e.g., COPD, arthritis, diabetes, osteoporosis, and stroke, cardiac and post-cancer rehabilitation).
- Assess seniors' risk of falling, provide prevention strategies, and improve strength and balance, in addition to treating fall-related injuries.
- Help maintain and/or improve the independence of Albertans with mobility issues.
- Provide effective management for incontinence, vestibular problems, lymphoedema, and post-partum pelvic pain via specialized physiotherapy.
- Teach self-management techniques and provide lifestyle, ergonomic and physical activity counselling.

Physiotherapists are integrated within primary health care models in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, USA, Australia, New Zealand, as well as in the Canadian and US armed forces.

Benefits of having a physiotherapist manage patients with musculoskeletal conditions include:

- High patient satisfaction and confidence regarding physiotherapists making decisions about fitness for work or activities.<sup>2,5</sup>

...continued

- Reduced physician visits and shorter wait times.<sup>3,7</sup>
- Decrease in sick leave recommendations.<sup>6</sup>
- Reduced prescription use.<sup>3,4,6</sup>
- Fewer diagnostic imaging tests ordered.<sup>7</sup>
- Lower overall health-care costs.<sup>8</sup>

Integrating physiotherapists into primary health-care teams could provide similar benefits for Albertans and the province’s health-care system. Albertans already recognize that not all care needs to be delivered by a physician and that funding models should allow other health professionals to provide the care they have the expertise to deliver. To date, physiotherapist involvement in Alberta’s primary care networks has been limited. This is possibly due to a lack of understanding of the role physiotherapists can play in primary care and funding mechanisms that do not support such inclusion. As primary health care in Alberta evolves, policy frameworks and funding must incorporate physiotherapists for the delivery of efficient and effective primary health care.

**Conclusion**

Primary health care is a major strategic focus in Alberta. Physiotherapists have been integrated successfully within primary care venues in other jurisdictions and have demonstrated significant impact on primary health-care delivery and outcomes.

Physiotherapy Alberta is committed to working with physiotherapists, government, policy makers, other health professionals, and Albertans to establish the value of physiotherapists in primary health care, and influence policy and funding mechanisms to support their integration into primary health-care teams.

**References**

1. Health Canada. About Primary Health Care? [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hcs-sss/prim/about-apos-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hcs-sss/prim/about-apos-eng.php) 2006
2. Webster VS, Holdsworth LK, McFadyen AK. Self-referral, access and physiotherapy: patients’ knowledge and attitudes. Results of a national trial. *Physiotherapy* 2008; 94: 141-149

3. Holdsworth LK, Webster VS, McFadyen AK. Physiotherapists’ and general practitioners’ views of self-referral and physiotherapy scope of practice: results from a national trial. *Physiotherapy* 2008; 94: 236-243
4. Department of Health 2008. Self-referral pilots to musculoskeletal physiotherapy and the implications for improving access to other AHP services. Department of Health, London, UK
5. Ludvigsson ML, Enthoven P, Physiotherapy in Primary Care Triage - the effects on utilization of medical services at primary health care clinics by patients and sub-groups of patients with musculoskeletal disorders: a case-control study, *Physiotherapy* 2012 Jun;98(2):131-7. doi: 10.1016/j.physio.2011.04.354. Epub 2011 Jun 30
6. Bornhöft L, Larsson ME, Thorn J, Physiotherapy in Primary Care Triage - the effects on utilization of medical services at primary health care clinics by patients and sub-groups of patients with musculoskeletal disorders: a case-control study, *Physiother Theory Pract.* 2015 Jan;31(1):45-52. doi: 10.3109/09593985.2014.932035. Epub 2014 Jul 2.
7. Fritz JM, Childs JD, Wainner RS and Flynn TW, Primary care referral of patients with low back pain to physical therapy: impact on future health care utilization and costs, *Spine (Phila Pa 1976)* 2012 Dec 1;37(25):2114-21. doi: 10.1097/BRS.0b013e31825d32f5.
8. Pendergast J, Kliethermes S, Freburger J, Duffy P. A Comparison of Health Care Use for Physician-Referred and Self-Referred Episodes of Outpatient Physical Therapy. *Health Services Research [serial online].* April 2012;47(2):633-654. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6773.2011.01324.x

<b>Updated</b>	March 2017
<b>Date for review</b>	March 2019
<b>Related position statements</b>	• Self-Referral for Physiotherapy