

Description of physical therapy The World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) advocates that the profession of physical therapy is responsible for articulating the profession's scope of practice and defining the roles of physical therapists. National physical therapy associations are responsible for defining physical therapy and physical therapists' roles relevant to their nation's health service delivery needs, ensuring that they are consistent with accepted international guidelines set out by WCPT. National physical therapy associations have a responsibility to seek support for legislation/regulation/recognition, which defines the distinctive and autonomous nature of physical therapy practice, including the profession's scope of practice. 1, 2 The scope of physical therapy practice is dynamic and responsive to patient/client and societal health needs. With the development of knowledge and technological advances, periodic review is required to ensure that the scope of practice reflects the latest evidence base and continues to be consistent with current health needs. Research is continually providing new evidence upon which practice will be built. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the understanding of human movement, which is central to the skills and knowledge of the physical therapist.

What is physical therapy? Physical therapy is services provided by physical therapists to individuals and populations to develop, maintain and restore maximum movement and functional ability throughout the lifespan. The service is provided in circumstances where movement and function are threatened by ageing, injury, pain, diseases, disorders, conditions and/or environmental factors and with the understanding that functional movement is central to what it means to be healthy. Physical therapy involves the interaction between the physical therapist, patients/clients, other health professionals, families, care givers and communities in a process where movement potential is examined/assessed and goals are agreed upon, using knowledge and skills unique to physical therapists (appendix 1). Physical therapists are concerned with identifying and maximising quality of life and movement potential within the spheres of promotion, prevention, treatment/intervention and rehabilitation. These spheres encompass physical, psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing. Physical therapists are qualified and professionally required to:

- undertake a comprehensive examination/assessment of the patient/client /population or needs of a client group
- evaluate the findings from the examination/assessment to make clinical judgments regarding patients/clients
- formulate a diagnosis, prognosis and plan
- provide consultation within their expertise and determine when patients/clients need to be referred to another professional
- implement a physical therapist intervention/treatment programme and education in agreement with the patient/client
- evaluate and re-evaluate the outcomes of any interventions/treatments/education
- make recommendations for self-management
- collaborate with health professionals and other key stakeholders.

The physical therapist's extensive knowledge of the body and its movement needs and potential is central to determining strategies for diagnosis and intervention. The practice settings will vary according to whether the physical therapy is concerned with health promotion, prevention, treatment/intervention or rehabilitation. The scope of physical therapist practice is not limited to direct patient/client care, but also includes:

- public health strategies
- advocating for patients/clients and for health
- supervising and delegating to others
- leading
- managing
- teaching
- research
- developing and implementing health policy at the local, national and international levels

Physical therapists operate as independent practitioners¹, as well as members of

health service provider teams, and are subject to the ethical principles of WCPT. 3, 4 They are able to act as first contact practitioners, and patients/clients may seek direct services without referral from another health professional. 5 Physical therapists are guided by their own code of ethical principles. 3, 4 Thus, they may have any of the following purposes:

- promoting the health and wellbeing of individuals and the general public/society, emphasising the importance of physical activity and exercise and the facilitation of such activities
- preventing impairments, activity limitations, participatory restrictions and disabilities in individuals at risk of altered movement behaviours due to health factors, socio-economic stressors, environmental factors and lifestyle factors
- providing interventions/treatment to restore integrity of body systems essential to movement, maximise function and recuperation, minimise incapacity, and enhance the quality of life, independent living and workability in individuals and groups of individuals with altered movement behaviours resulting from impairments, activity limitations, participatory restrictions and disabilities
- modifying environmental, home and work access and barriers to ensure full participation in one's normal and expected societal roles

The education and clinical practice of physical therapists will vary according to the social, economic, cultural and political contexts in which they practise. However, it is a single profession, and the first professional qualification, obtained in any country, represents the completion of a curriculum that qualifies the physical therapist to use the professional title and to practise as an independent professional. 6–8 Principles supporting the description of physical therapy WCPT has developed this international description of physical therapy based on the following principles, which it encourages its member organisations to use in defining physical therapy practice nationally. WCPT advocates that a description must:

- respect and recognise the history and roots of the profession
- build on the reality of contemporary practice and the existing and growing body of research
- allow for variation in: cultures, values and beliefs; health needs of people and societies; and the structure of health systems around the world
- use terminology that is widely understood and adequately defined
- recognise internationally accepted models and definitions (e.g. World Health Organization definition of health, World Health Organization International Classification of Function) 9, 10
- provide for the ongoing growth and development of the profession and for the identification of the unique contribution of physical therapy and its evolving scope of practice.
- acknowledge the importance of physical therapy, related medical and social sciences within physical therapy curricula at all levels
- emphasise the need for practice to be evidence-based whenever possible
- appreciate the inter-dependence of practice, research and education within the profession
- recognise the need to review continuously the description as the profession changes in response to the health needs of society and the development of knowledge in physical therapy
- anticipate that work will flow from this description as it is used to assist in the development of curricula and identification of areas for research