

APA VALUING SKILLS SERIES

PHYSIOTHERAPY IN PAIN MANAGEMENT

Persistent pain affects approximately one-fifth of the Australian population¹. Many Australians wait in pain, often medicated on opioid drugs, with up to 80 per cent missing out on effective treatment that could improve their health and quality of life.^{2,3}

Physiotherapists, as primary contact practitioners, have the expertise to assess and manage patients at all stages of the chronic disease continuum. Our current health system fails to facilitate this essential care—patients are not publicly funded to access physiotherapy services beyond the currently very limited MBS chronic disease items.

Physio First: You are in safe hands

Treating, managing and preventing chronic pain, which affects both physical and mental health, must be a national priority.

Physiotherapy is an effective treatment strategy for acute, chronic and neuropathic pain.

As clinical leaders in assessment, prevention, management of recovery and rehabilitation, physiotherapists work across many areas including musculoskeletal, neurological, oncological, paediatric and cardiorespiratory practice. Physiotherapy is central to the treatment of chronic pain as part of a multidisciplinary approach to pain management. Physiotherapists utilise a broad scope of practice to guide and support people with chronic pain towards a better quality of life; they help get patients moving, which is critical to managing persistent chronic pain.



Pain
Pain management

Physiotherapists assess movement, knowledge and fears about recovery, all of which frequently occur in association with pain. They teach pain management techniques and develop tailored exercise programs



Physiotherapists are often first contact practitioners for people seeking care for pain. Therefore, physiotherapists also play a key role in preventing acute pain from becoming chronic.



Treatment may be given within a hospital, clinic or community setting.

Physiotherapy is central to addressing the pain burden as part of a multidisciplinary team taking a biopsychosocial approach

Physiotherapists have the skills, knowledge and expertise to **diagnose, manage and treat** a diverse range of acute and chronic health conditions and movement disorders. As members of a regulated profession, physiotherapists use clinical reasoning to determine the pain diagnosis and adopt the optimal treatment for each pathology presented. Physiotherapists are trained in evidence-based practice, evaluating the key issues and utilising numerous potential treatment approaches.

Physiotherapy management is effective in reducing pain and in improving quality of life, physical functioning and depression.

Pain physiotherapy treatment incorporates patient-specific education and pain management skills training along with movement-based strategies, focusing on empowering the person in pain to return to activity and function safely.



Physiotherapists **assess** the many different contributors to the experience of pain.



Physiotherapists also screen for **red flags** to identify concerning signs and symptoms and refer to a physician or specialist as appropriate.



Specific and targeted **exercise programs** help to condition and rehabilitate.



Manual therapy techniques are used to reduce pain and facilitate recovery of normal movement.

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). Chronic pain in Australia. Canberra: AIHW.

2. Commonwealth of Australia as represented by the Department of Health. (2021). National Strategic Action Plan for Pain Management. Canberra.

3. Hogg, M. N., Kavanagh, A., Farrell, M. J., & Burke, A. L. J. (2021). Waiting in Pain II: An Updated Review of the Provision of Persistent Pain Services in Australia. *Pain medicine (Malden, Mass.)*, 22(6):1367–1375.

Why we need reform

Chronic disease and pain cannot be addressed without significant reform to embed prevention and early intervention into the health system.

More money is spent on musculoskeletal disorders, such as osteoarthritis and back pain, than on any other disease, condition or injury in Australia, at a cost of \$14 billion per year.

Physiotherapy's role in solving the opioid epidemic

Patients with chronic and complex pain and those with mental health and addiction issues are overwhelming our health system. Safe and effective treatment for these patients is essential. Opioid medications are only one option but they are overused because of inadequate access to multidisciplinary services such as physiotherapy and psychology.⁴

Physiotherapy is essential care for the close to 7 million Australians who live with musculoskeletal conditions.



Disease prevalence
7 million

Almost
1 in 3 (30%)
Australians

1 in 7
Australians
have some
form of
arthritis

**12% of the total
burden of disease
and injury**
in Australia



Back pain is the most common
musculoskeletal condition,
affecting 16% of the population,
and the third leading cause
of overall disease burden



The lack of publicly funded access to **First Contact Physiotherapy** in primary care means that Australians are missing out on better and faster access to diagnosis and treatment of musculoskeletal pain and conditions.

Access to prevention, early intervention, diagnosis and quality care to improve function and reduce pain is essential. Living with chronic pain is not only debilitating to the individual; it also places a significant economic burden on the nation.

Too many Australians are without access to prevention, early detection and quality care. And for too many, this means that they have to live with chronic pain. Investment in publicly funded physiotherapy will advance health, improve care and increase value. The APA calls for greater integration of physiotherapists into primary healthcare. There is a need to shift towards a wellness approach to help individuals get the best out of life.

The solution? Publicly funded First Contact Physiotherapy in primary care.

This requires a fundamental shift in pain management treatment and funding.

To expand the treatment pathway, new evidence-based treatment strategies are needed including multidisciplinary pain management interventions. In making the required transitions, recognition of active self-management in a biopsychosocial approach, rather than a reliance on passive modalities like drugs, is vital. This requires a fundamental shift towards funded collaborative care that empowers—care that is personalised, coordinated and enabling.

Rising costs and growing demand will persist without new care delivery models that can facilitate continuous management of pain.

Physiotherapy plays a clinical leadership role in pain management, supporting patients with chronic pain, who often require long-term care with frequent reassessment and adjustment of therapy. Physiotherapy is integral to the prevention of chronic pain because early interventions work to prevent pain-avoidance behaviours through exercise and education. Where chronic pain has developed, physiotherapists work as part of a multidisciplinary team to support patients in managing daily activities.

The APA is calling on government to expand public physiotherapy for pain management.



PHYSIOTHERAPY
Funding to drive
new models of care
for **chronic pain**
prevention and
management

PREVENTION

Prevention and early intervention should be incorporated into the system

Prevention and early intervention physiotherapy services for people at risk of persistent pain

ONGOING

Beyond the MBS, a range of existing funding models should also be utilised

MBS pain-related items expanded to enable high-value care via multidisciplinary, patient-centred approaches to pain management

4. Dunlop AJ, Lokuge B, Lintzeris N. (2021). Opioid prescribing in Australia: too much and not enough. *Med J Aust.* 2021 Aug 2;215(3):117–118.