



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

Physiotherapy: high-value care for all Northern Territorians

Invest in physiotherapy and put patients first.
Together, we can shape a healthier future
for the Northern Territory.

**Australian Physiotherapy Association
2024 Northern Territory Election Priorities**

Physiotherapy in context

Physiotherapists bring value-based and evidence-based expertise to patients and the health system. They are an important part of healthcare across the life span; general practitioners refer more patients to physiotherapists than to any other single group. As primary contact practitioners, physiotherapists have the expertise to manage the care of patients at various stages of the chronic disease continuum.

In Australia, physiotherapists rank as the fourth largest group among registered primary healthcare professionals. They work in a number of settings, including hospitals, private practices, community health centres and universities.

Physiotherapists are highly qualified health professionals who work in partnership with their patients to help people get better and stay well. They assess, diagnose, treat and work to prevent injury, disease and disability through evidence-based interventions.

Physiotherapists work within diverse contexts of practice, including primary and community care and inpatient and outpatient services across emergency, acute, subacute and post-acute care. Their role extends to injury prevention, rehabilitation, maintenance of functional mobility, chronic disease management, health promotion, patient and carer education, occupational health and sport settings.

Physiotherapists are clinical leaders who work both individually and across multidisciplinary teams. The skills and training of physiotherapists equip them to work across a wide variety of conditions and disabilities to improve the health status of individuals over their life span. Physiotherapists also work to deliver improved population health outcomes within their local areas.

A physiotherapist can diagnose

Physiotherapists **diagnose** injuries and disorders associated with the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular and neurological systems.



Physiotherapists use clinical reasoning for diagnosis and treatment



Physiotherapists have clinical skills across all anatomical and neurophysiological domains and use evidence-informed **clinical reasoning** to assist and advise the patient, their medical practitioner, caregivers and their healthcare team in ongoing management.

Physiotherapists are regulated under the National Scheme

Physiotherapists must be **registered** with the Physiotherapy Board of Australia and meet the Board's registration standards to be able to practise in Australia.



Invest in physiotherapy to advance health, improve care and increase value

Physiotherapy is essential care for the one in three Northern Territorians (Territorians) who live with musculoskeletal conditions. Too many Territorians cannot access services for prevention, early detection and quality care. This means that they have to live with chronic pain. Investing in publicly funded physiotherapy will advance health, improve care and increase value.

Reform begins by improving the patient pathway and physiotherapy plays an important role in this.

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) has identified priority areas and solutions that will strengthen care for all Territorians, while also reducing inequity, through physiotherapy-led models.

We are calling on candidates for the 2024 Northern Territory election to support **five policy priorities**:



Improve access to primary and community care physiotherapy and enable physiotherapists to work to their **full scope of practice**



Invest in training measures to ensure a **culturally safe** physiotherapy workforce



Invest in **multidisciplinary team care** and support a sustainable workforce in the Northern Territory



Support further **physiotherapy positions in hospitals and urgent care settings** to improve patient flow, efficiencies and patient outcomes



Fund, support and embed **advanced practice** physiotherapists in Northern Territory Health and primary care settings.

These priorities provide ways for the incoming Northern Territory Government to **invest in physiotherapy** so that we can realise real reform through improved access to essential care, reduced out-of-pocket costs and, most importantly, a decreased need for costly and inefficient treatments.

Invest in physiotherapy and put patients first

Physiotherapy provides a path to better health for all Territorians. Opportunities exist for the next Northern Territory Government to leverage physiotherapy in leading health reform. Long wait times, fragmented services, inadequate funding, lack of workforce sustainability and affordability factors mean that the current health system leaves too many people without access to the essential care they need. It is those most in need, our high-priority groups, who are disproportionately affected.

The solutions that will fix healthcare lie in:

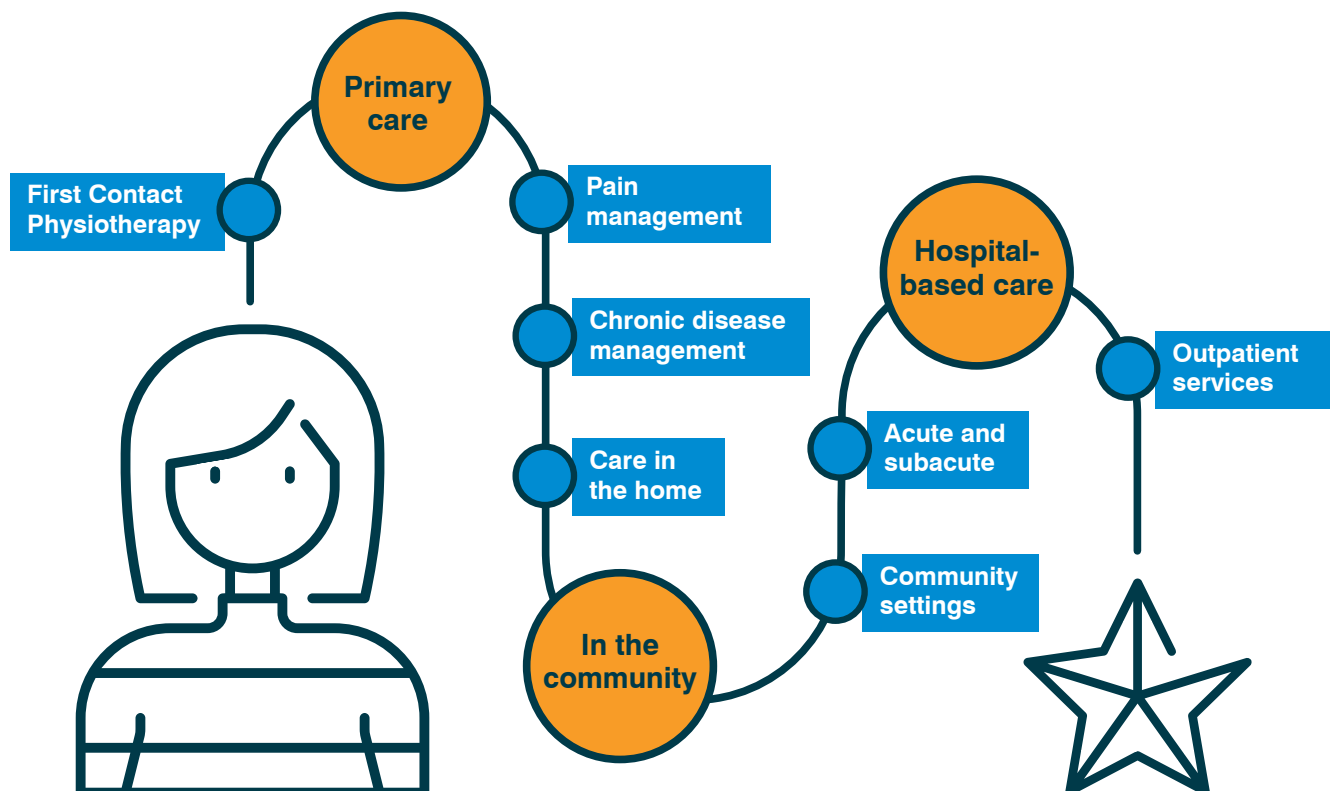
- valuing the skills of the entire health workforce
- ensuring that healthcare professionals are culturally safe
- prioritising integration
- lifting the structural barriers to strengthen access
- streamlining the patient journey.

It is through the priority areas and solutions outlined in this statement that we can begin to provide greater value to all Territorians.

In this 2024 Northern Territory Election Priorities Statement, the APA presents ways to connect and integrate care. The solutions will help deliver on the four outcomes that governments and patients want—high-value care, reduced costs, improved efficiency and enhanced patient ownership of their own healthcare.

How physiotherapy supports patient outcomes

A visual representation of the delivery of preventive care, treatment and rehabilitative physiotherapy services across the lifespan in selected populations and settings.



Our solutions will improve the patient journey, deliver cost-effective services and enhance patient care:



01 Build a sustainable physiotherapy workforce

Transforming the health system requires a workforce policy solution to ensure best use of the health workforce alongside structural reforms so that patients are connected to the most clinically appropriate and cost-effective pathways.

A sustainable physiotherapy workforce is essential to provide optimal care for people living in remote areas across the Territory. Prioritising physiotherapy services in the delivery of multidisciplinary care in health settings is urgently needed to address vast unmet needs in rural areas. Stronger models of care will enable integrated care, strengthen access and build the capacity of health service delivery.



02 Increase access to culturally safe physiotherapy services for First Nations People

First Nations people in Australia continue to shoulder a greater burden of chronic disease than their non-Indigenous counterparts, with many socio-economic factors, such as access to culturally safe care, contributing to these health disparities.

Strengthening the cultural competency of physiotherapists, growing the First Nations physiotherapy workforce and enhancing access to culturally safe services are key to making allied health services more appropriate for our communities.



03 Use physiotherapy in non-operative care pathways

Physiotherapy provides alternative pathways that prevent unnecessary hospitalisation and reduce readmission rates. By keeping people out of hospital in the first place, we address the urgent need to alleviate the current pressures on the public hospital system. Investing in physiotherapy is therefore a critical component of health reform.



04 Increase access to physiotherapy in hospital and community settings

Physiotherapists play a vital role in both the Northern Territory's hospital system and the community. They assess and treat a diverse range of patients and conditions. By investing in physiotherapy, we can improve patient flow through hospitals and emergency departments, providing more timely access to care. This will reduce the burden on the hospital system.



05 Recognise and fund advanced practice physiotherapist roles in hospitals and community settings

Advanced practice physiotherapists are an integral part of Australia's hospital system, working as key members of multidisciplinary teams in emergency, outpatient and acute care and in rehabilitation.

Services including musculoskeletal physiotherapy screening clinics and multidisciplinary services have been developed in other states and territories to address overburdened specialist orthopaedic outpatient public hospital services. These advanced practice physiotherapy-led models of care have been shown to be successful and there is an urgent need for the development of similar services in the Northern Territory.

Increased funding of primary care-based interventions through **physiotherapy-led screening clinics** will ensure patients can be managed without surgery, including for osteoarthritis of the knee and hip, spinal and neurological conditions, continence issues, gynaecological conditions and paediatric-specific disabilities.

PRIORITY AREA ONE



Building a **sustainable** physiotherapy workforce

There is a health workforce crisis in Central Australia and much of remote Northern Territory.

Every community across the Northern Territory deserves access to vital health services. However, many Territorians have no access to physiotherapy. This contributes to inequities in healthcare and adverse health outcomes. To address this, we need greater investment in publicly funded physiotherapy and prevention strategies integrated into the management and delivery of care.

In the Northern Territory, the prevalence of certain critical health conditions, such as diabetes, kidney disease and rheumatic heart disease, is among the highest globally. Despite a widespread understanding of the societal factors contributing to these diseases, the incidence of infections and other health risks associated with them remains high. However, it's recognised that the negative effects of these diseases can be significantly reduced by investing in approaches that utilise the full health workforce.

There is a need to fund new opportunities to leverage the physiotherapy workforce to support healthier lives and drive system-level change to advance health, improve care and increase value. Workforce solutions must focus on facilitating wider scopes of practice and ensuring a greater emphasis on multidisciplinary care in the healthcare system. This cannot be achieved through continued reliance on the current payment models and traditional structures, which disincentivise integration.

Current workforce models remain disjointed and suboptimal for the complex needs of our population and continue to add costs to the healthcare system. We call on the new government to consider workforce optimisation and planning to strengthen the healthcare system and health outcomes. The future healthcare workforce requires a strong effort put into developing a workforce local to the Northern Territory, particularly our First Nations workforce. We call on the government to invest in education and training programs that foster skill development to ensure that the health workforce is equipped to provide high-quality, culturally safe, patient-centred care to our communities.

To address the rural workforce crisis, policy solutions must focus on workforce distribution beyond general practice workforce planning. Strategies to mobilise the physiotherapy workforce must extend to expanding access for First Nations people.

Priority 1.1 | Strengthen access to publicly funded First Contact Physiotherapy

Action: Focus on new funding models that formalise public physiotherapy in an integrated health system.

We must ensure that people who need physiotherapy the most can access it. Reform success is reliant on how we strategically prioritise access and outcomes—and this will be achieved only through a much stronger focus on equity. Most of all, it will require our leaders to find the policy courage to fund fully integrated models of care with innovative funding models.

Publicly funded physiotherapy means more than just access; it means empowerment, prevention and the opportunity for everyone to reach their highest level of health and wellbeing. First Contact Physiotherapy practitioners can manage musculoskeletal conditions effectively to reduce the load on general practitioners (GPs) in primary care. Importantly, as first contact professionals, physiotherapists have the experience, skills and clinical reasoning abilities to diagnose musculoskeletal conditions and determine appropriate care pathways.

Access to care, along with the patient journey through a complex health system funded by the Commonwealth, states and territories, urgently needs structural reform. In building workforce capability, we need a focus on both workforce planning and service redesign in order to deliver contemporary care models and clinical excellence.

Funding multidisciplinary teams allows for comprehensive care that addresses all aspects of a patient's health, improving outcomes through collaborative expertise. These essential shifts represent a more integrated, accessible and effective approach to healthcare.

Priority 1.2 | Build a sustainable physiotherapy workforce

Action: Provide incentives to attract more physiotherapists to the Northern Territory and address vast unmet need for care.

The APA is calling on the Northern Territory Government to provide support and initiatives that will grow the local physiotherapy workforce. Every community and individual in the Territory deserves equal access to first-class healthcare. However, communities in the Northern Territory have significantly limited access to physiotherapy due to geographical and financial barriers.

Currently, the Northern Territory has the lowest rate of physiotherapy professionals per capita compared to all other jurisdictions in Australia, more than 25 per cent less than the national full-time equivalent average. Workforce recruitment and retention are difficult due to financial constraints, inadequate support networks and limited career pathways. This is despite the known complex health issues and geographical barriers that those in the Northern Territory already face, further disadvantaging Territorians in terms of equitable healthcare access. There needs to be a focus on improving policies, programs and infrastructure so we can attract allied health professionals to the Northern Territory and encourage them to stay.

Priority 1.3 | Fund student clinical placements

Action: Support funded clinical placement positions such as those we have recently seen for teachers, nurses and social workers.

Prioritising sustainable training pipelines, including investment in new graduates and teaching capacity, is key to ensuring that the future workforce is resourced based on community need. Changes in population and reforms towards more integrated models of care will also affect demand, distribution and scope of practice.

Funding for student placements is needed to help build a sustainable workforce and to overcome placement poverty. The commencement of a local physiotherapy course at Charles Darwin University has provided the Northern Territory with a significant opportunity to help fill gaps in the current workforce. However, the ability to commit to study and complete clinical placements is a barrier to study and contributes to placement poverty.

Priority 1.4 | Address the challenges of delivering services in rural communities

Action: Support the physiotherapy profession in growing a sustainable rural workforce.

Providing equitable access to care continues to be a fundamental challenge for rural physiotherapists working within private and public settings. A workforce strategy is needed to address the challenges of delivering services in rural communities and to ensure that care can be tailored to the specific needs of locals.

New funding models are needed to drive fully integrated care that encompasses telehealth. There also needs to be more investment in incentivised team-based care arrangements to increase access for patients. These factors will lead to the success and sustainability of physiotherapy as a service.

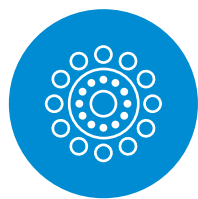
Physiotherapists need to be incentivised to apply for rural roles in the same way that GPs are. There should be recognition that physiotherapists are a highly skilled, supported and valued resource. Further, there is a need to commit to improving income streams and positioning physiotherapy in rural areas as a viable career choice.

The results of our 2023 APA Workforce Census showed that one-third of the participants are willing to work rurally, especially those in the early stages of their career—but require financial assistance to relocate.

Federal strategies, including the Workforce Incentive Program, have failed due to a flawed design that directs funding through GP clinics.

It is vital that we be able to scale up and replicate successful models of care but this relies on ongoing access to funds beyond grant rounds. It is also important that we expand the capacity for primary health networks and fund physiotherapy solutions that will address the challenges faced by rural health services. The solutions need to support existing providers as well as set up opportunities for workforce growth.

PRIORITY AREA TWO



Increase access to **culturally safe** physiotherapy services for First Nations people

Physiotherapists are vital to improving health outcomes for First Nations people. They provide patients with the skills and strategies to treat a range of conditions and to manage and prevent chronic disease. Access to coordinated and timely healthcare improves health outcomes for people with chronic and complex health needs. Improving access to and providing culturally safe healthcare, including preventive services, for First Nations people must be prioritised.

Strengthening the cultural competency of physiotherapists, growing the First Nations physiotherapy workforce and enhancing access to culturally safe services are key shifts required to make allied health services more appropriate for First Nations communities.

Priority 2.1 | Foster cultural respect, safety and responsiveness in health system reform

Action: Promote community-led decision-making through genuine and collaborative engagement with First Nations people.

In building a sustainable workforce that is aligned with First Nations cultures, there is a need to lead and act in the spirit of Reconciliation. To ensure that healthcare services are culturally safe for First Nations people, we need to incorporate strategies that elevate the perspectives and voices of First Nations people with lived experiences. Through these actions, we will ensure a more culturally responsive, integrated and accessible health system, which we know can generate improved health outcomes for First Nations people.

Priority 2.2 | Build our own workforce

Action: Invest in the First Nations physiotherapy workforce, including in the development of allied health assistant roles for the Northern Territory, to create a training pathway for those wanting to become physiotherapists.

We call for expanded programs to encompass opportunities for First Nations people to become allied health assistants. Allied health assistants provide support to allied health professionals, including physiotherapists, and investment in this area creates a viable training pathway for those wanting to become physiotherapists.

Preparing the next generation of First Nations young people to enter the workforce, take up training opportunities or pursue further education requires targeted investment. This is essential if we are to ensure that the health system can address the needs of First Nations people. With First Nations physiotherapists currently comprising around 0.7 per cent of the entire physiotherapy workforce, there is a significant need to invest in growing this cohort of physiotherapists.

Priority 2.3 | Embed appropriately trained, culturally safe physiotherapists within Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services

Action: Fund a trial to embed appropriately trained, culturally safe physiotherapists within Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are the preferred model of healthcare for many First Nations people in Australia due to the centrality of culture in all elements of their service delivery. This is key to creating a culturally safe and comprehensive healthcare service that is oriented to the needs of First Nations communities.

PRIORITY AREA THREE



Use physiotherapy in **non-operative pathways** to keep Northern Territorians out of hospital

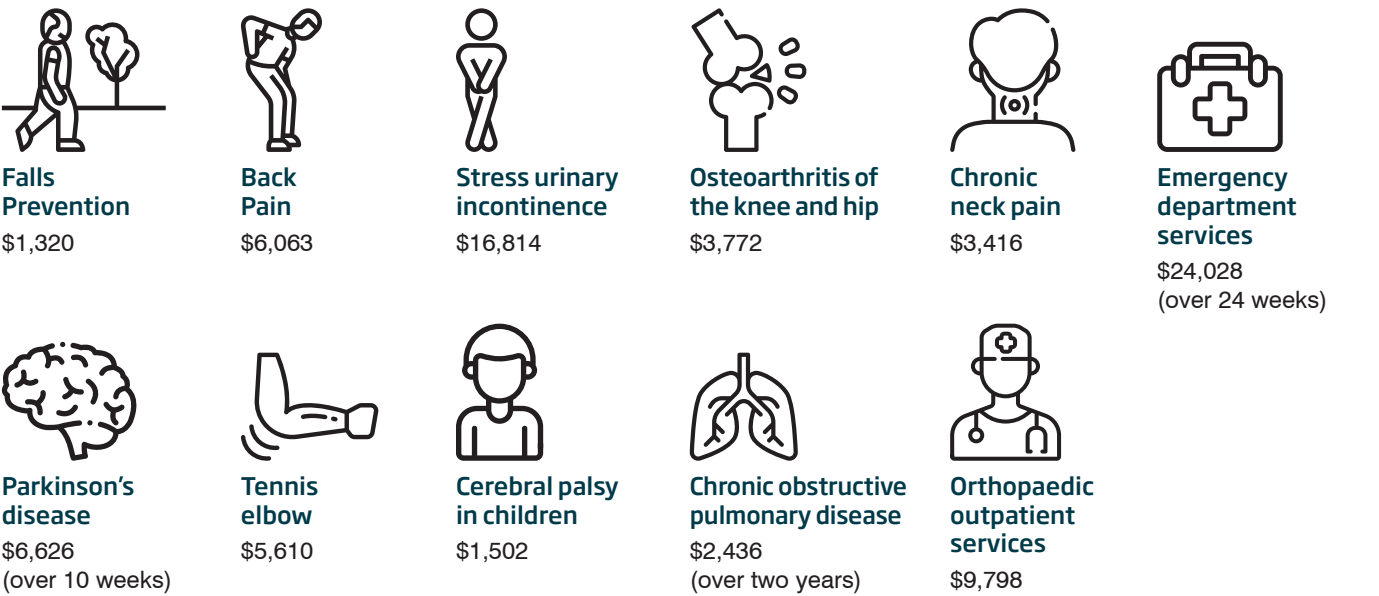
Physiotherapy provides value to Northern Territory residents at all stages of life and in response to many different life events. However, physiotherapy is often underused, despite strong evidence suggesting that integrated care models that include physiotherapy services reduce the rates of hospitalisation and surgery. We need to instigate solutions beyond outdated medical-centric models to get the best health and efficiency outcomes.

Physiotherapists can make a greater contribution to primary healthcare to help prevent unnecessary hospitalisations. This will enable more timely and appropriate intervention.

Physiotherapists have the skills and knowledge to embed health promotion and prevention activities into routine care. The cost-effectiveness of physiotherapy interventions is proven in literature and through the cost-benefit analysis performed by Nous Group in 2020, which builds a robust picture of the high-level impacts of physiotherapy and the value it provides to the healthcare sector.

Value of physiotherapy in Australia

Physiotherapy delivers an average net-benefit for a range of life events and stages.



Source: Nous (2020)
Approach and methodology: Net-benefits were calculated accounting for quality of life improvements, the cost of service delivery, patient-time opportunity costs, the avoided costs of alternative or usual treatment, and calculated over a period of time. Please refer to full report for details. Nous Group. (2020). Value of Physiotherapy in Australia. Australian Physiotherapy Association. https://australian.physio/sites/default/files/Report_FA_WEB.pdf

Priority 3.1 | Invest in physiotherapy-led early intervention and prevention strategies

Action: Invest in publicly funded physiotherapy to increase the coverage of preventive health services in the Northern Territory.

Building on *Healthy, well and thriving 2024 to 2030—the Northern Territory's prevention and early intervention framework for chronic conditions*, the APA is calling for improved access to physiotherapy services, particularly for priority populations that stand to benefit the most. To keep people healthy and well for as long as possible, there is a need to focus on prevention of and early intervention into chronic conditions. This includes musculoskeletal conditions, continence issues and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Birthing trauma and incontinence

Pelvic floor physiotherapy in an outpatient setting can help prevent and treat incontinence by assessing and teaching appropriate pelvic floor exercises. This can reduce the likelihood of birth trauma, incontinence, lower back pain and other complications post-delivery, which decreases surgical intervention rates and increases the quality of life for many patients.

Falls, fall-related fractures and hospitalisation prevention

Physiotherapy and fall-prevention strategies can keep people active and independent for longer. Publicly funded physiotherapy-led fall prevention programs keep older Australians out of hospital.

Priority 3.2 | Optimise patient outcomes during care transitions

Action: Prioritise physiotherapy-led in-home care funding and packages.

Physiotherapy improves patient physical function to facilitate a timely and safe discharge from hospital. It also reduces readmission rates by providing treatment and at-home rehabilitation for people with stroke, fall injuries, long hospital stays, traumatic brain injury, post-surgical conditions and chronic disease.

Priority 3.3 | Improve access to care pathways for chronic conditions

Action: Prioritise access to physiotherapy for people with chronic conditions.

Physiotherapy plays a vital role in the management of chronic musculoskeletal, pain, cardiorespiratory and neurological conditions. Current funding arrangements provide extremely limited access to allied health services for patients with chronic conditions. This is insufficient to address their complex needs.

Outpatient physiotherapy-led pulmonary rehabilitation programs provide education and exercise, empower chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and respiratory patients to self-manage, and reduce the risk of hospitalisation and complications while in hospital.

PRIORITY AREA FOUR



Increase access to physiotherapy in hospital and community settings, including minor injury, illness and urgent care clinics

Faster treatment, better health outcomes and lower costs are required to meet current and future healthcare needs in the Northern Territory. The solutions that will fix healthcare lie in valuing the skills of the entire health workforce. Spending on physiotherapy will bring more value for money by reducing the need for costly secondary care.

Through Medicare Urgent Care Clinics we can test a new and more efficient pathway by having advanced practice physiotherapists work as primary care providers and first contact practitioners. This will provide faster access to diagnosis, treatment and care for patients with musculoskeletal pain and other conditions.

Priority 4.1 | Put physiotherapy services in Urgent Care Clinics

Action: Prioritise a publicly funded first contact physiotherapy service in Urgent Care Clinics.

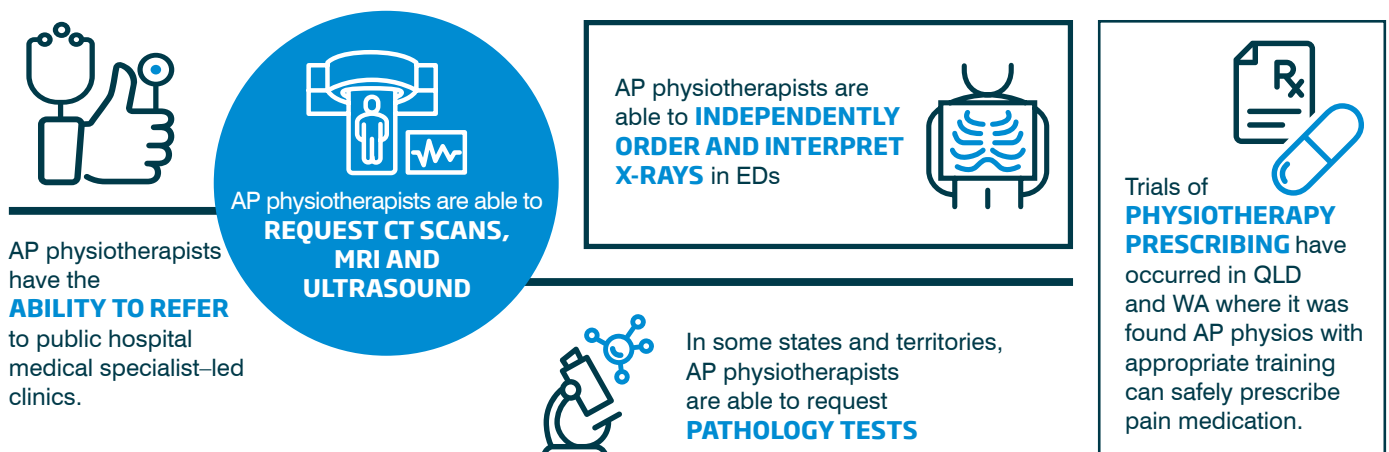
Physiotherapy is key to ensuring continuity of care across the primary and acute care interface. It can help alleviate the workloads of GPs by diverting non-life-threatening emergencies and keeping these types of patients out of the emergency department. Rolling out first contact physiotherapy in primary care settings will benefit patients and the health system. It will lead to cost savings and free up the time of health workers.

Supporting physiotherapists to work at the top of their scope can address current inefficiencies in primary care and in the hospital sector

Advanced practice (AP) emergency department (ED) physiotherapists are already well embedded in the state public healthcare system across Australia, providing a sustainable and highly skilled workforce base from which to expand services at this level.

Expanding this workforce can help meet unmet patient need at the primary and acute care interface, including in the implementation of Medicare Urgent Care Clinics nationally. A significant proportion of the likely patient load in these clinics will be people with musculoskeletal conditions such as sprains, strains and spinal pain—conditions best managed by physiotherapists. Funding physiotherapy roles in this setting is likely to improve patient outcomes and offer a significant return on investment.

Advanced Practice physiotherapy roles require high levels of clinical expertise



Priority 4.2 | Create a more sustainable workforce by prioritising physiotherapy in hospitals and the community

Action: Prioritise physiotherapy in the public hospital system.

Physiotherapists play an important role in patient recovery. They facilitate a safe hospital discharge, reduce the length of a patient's stay and prevent hospital readmission. This frees up valuable health resources. Despite this, investment in physiotherapy in areas such as cardiac rehabilitation, oncology, lymphoedema management and community care is significantly limited compared to our interstate counterparts.

In response to Northern Territory Health's most significant workforce challenges, there is a need to focus on supporting and retaining the current physiotherapy workforce, building and attracting new pipelines of talent, and adapting and innovating to find new ways of delivering care. Such investment will allow Northern Territory Health to build a sustainable and supported physiotherapy workforce, resulting in the delivery of high-quality healthcare across the Northern Territory.



PRIORITY AREA FIVE



Recognise and fund **advanced practice** physiotherapy roles in hospitals and community settings

Advanced practice physiotherapy is an established part of Australia's healthcare landscape, developed initially to address pressures in public hospital medical specialist outpatient clinics and emergency departments.

Advanced practice physiotherapists take responsibility for assessment, diagnosis and management planning for patients who may present with complex, undifferentiated or undiagnosed conditions. They operate with a high degree of autonomy and professional responsibility in environments that may be uncertain or unpredictable and where there may be significant clinical risk. Where advanced practice roles have been implemented, they have been shown to alleviate pressures on hospital systems while delivering safe, effective and highly cost-effective patient care.

Despite this, investment in advanced practice physiotherapy in the Northern Territory lags behind the rest of the country. The APA is calling on the Northern Territory Government to invest in advanced practice physiotherapy through service delivery and workforce development.

Priority 5.1 | Recognise advanced practice physiotherapy roles

Action: Develop Advanced practice physiotherapy roles to improve the patient journey.

The APA is calling for further investment in developing advanced practice physiotherapy roles. This will ensure consistency in resourcing these roles across districts and networks, therefore enabling the full potential of the workforce to be used. There are barriers in the current award that prevent the full recognition of skills held by advanced practice physiotherapists.

Advanced practice physiotherapists use advanced skills to assess, diagnose and manage complex medical conditions. The current award classification system fails to distinguish the unique role and responsibilities held by advanced practice physiotherapists, hindering appropriate recognition and funding allocation.

To ensure the sustainability and growth of advanced practice physiotherapy services, there is a need for a distinct classification within the Tier 2 structure. By recognising the vital role of advanced practice physiotherapists and providing adequate funding mechanisms, healthcare organisations can optimise patient care delivery and promote the continued advancement of physiotherapy services within the hospital setting.

The APA calls for a new funding tier for advanced practice physiotherapy practitioners and clinics.

Priority 5.2 | Triage and management of hospital specialist waiting lists

Action: Increase investment in physiotherapy-led screening clinics in local health districts and specialty health networks.

For most musculoskeletal conditions, non-operative care is the most appropriate treatment. Advanced practice physiotherapists play a key role in the management of hospital specialist outpatient waiting lists by assessing and coordinating care pathways. Advanced practice physiotherapists have high levels of diagnostic agreement with their medical colleagues. Physiotherapy-led orthopaedic triage clinics are also seen as an effective alternative to usual care in the short, immediate and long term. These clinics are highly cost-effective and reduce the need for more hospital medical officers and specialists.

The Medicare-funded Urgent Care Clinics are an example of a novel model designed to alleviate pressure on the current system. However, physiotherapy services have not been included in this model in the Northern Territory.

The APA calls for sustained funding for these innovative service delivery models, which address the rising demands on health services, ensuring that people receive the right care, at the right time, in the right place, with the right resources and by the right person.