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NEWS AND NOTES

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Decision Making Ability of Physical Therapists in a Direct Access Patient Care Environment



Direct access physical therapy is a highly debated topic in the world of healthcare centered on whether or not physical therapists should be able to see patients without a referral from a physician. As physical therapy grows as a profession in times of ever-changing health care, its autonomy and the ability to see patients via direct access will remain under scrutiny. The purpose of this study was to determine the ability of physical therapists to make clinical decisions regarding patient management in direct access settings.

The authors randomly chose 1,000 members of the private practice section (PPS) of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). These individuals were mailed a paper survey (instrument) and were given the option to complete and mail back or respond through a web site. Of their randomized sample, the authors received 394 usable questionnaires.

The survey used by the authors included 12 case studies concerning conditions that could be seen in physical therapy offices without referral. The cases included musculoskeletal conditions, non-critical medical conditions or critical medical conditions taken from existing research. A small panel of four expert physical therapists reviewed these cases. Data was collected over a four-month period, and descriptive statistics were used to characterize

the participants and their practice setting as well as the percentages of participants who were able to determine the correct management decision in each case.

The authors found that when dealing with musculoskeletal and non-critical medical conditions, physical therapists correctly chose the management strategy 87% and 88% of the time respectively. Physical therapists correctly chose the correct management strategy 79% of the time for critical medical conditions. Additionally, the authors found that physical therapists with orthopedic specializations (OCS) were two times more likely to make correct management decisions for musculoskeletal and critical medical conditions.

This study provides support for the ability of physical therapists to manage patients safely and effectively in direct access settings, especially if they have orthopedic specialization (OCS).

Jette, D. U., Ardleigh, K., Chandler, K., & McShea, L. (2006). Decision making ability of physical therapist: Physical therapy intervention or medical referral. *Physical Therapy*, 86 (12), 1619-1629.



Oklahoma is one of 6 states that currently does not have some form of direct access for Physical Therapy. The Oklahoma Physical Therapy Association (OPTA) is currently taking steps in gaining direct access to patients in Oklahoma by authoring a patient access bill to be considered in 2010 state legislature. The passing of this bill will presumably be opposed by physician groups in our state. The primary reason these groups publicly voice for opposing this bill will likely be due to patient safety concerns. The previous research article is strong evidence that patient safety would not be compromised if such a bill is passed and PTs are allowed direct access to patients.



The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), a national professional organization representing more than 73,330 members throughout the United States, established the specialist certification program in 1978. Specialization is the process by which a physical therapist builds on a broad base of professional education and practice to develop a greater depth of knowledge and skills related to a particular area of practice. Clinical specialization in physical therapy responds to a specific area of patient need and requires knowledge, skill, and experience exceeding that of the physical therapist at entry to the profession and unique to the specialized area of practice. The specialist certification program was established to provide formal recognition for physical therapists with advanced clinical knowledge, experience, and skills in a special area of practice and to assist consumers and the health care community in identifying these physical therapists. Currently there are eight specialty areas – Cardiopulmonary, Clinical Electrophysiology, Geriatrics, Neurology, Orthopaedics, Pediatrics, Sports, and Women's Health Physical Therapy.



In Oklahoma there are currently 1,573 Physical Therapists licensed to practice in the state. Of those 1,573 Physical Therapists 20 have achieved board certification in Orthopaedics (OCS). Don Stover is 1 of those 20 Physical Therapists, thus assuring Stover PT is delivering safe and effective patient care as our state strives for direct patient access.



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