

Australian Physiotherapy Association Submission



APA Submission to Inquiry into Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

The APA believes the Victorian government's response to COVID-19 was appropriate and agile, and that a number of initiatives introduced warrant extension. Access and funding for allied health service provision via telehealth, under multiple funding schemes including Transport Accident Commission (TAC), WorkCover, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), Private Health Insurance (PHI) and the Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS) has enabled patients, particularly the most vulnerable and most remote, to continue to access essential and best practice care. The APA recommends that funding for telehealth be extended permanently, or at the very least, until COVID-19 restrictions are ceased.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many physiotherapy skills in the acute hospital setting to the fore. Physiotherapists are essential in the management of acutely unwell cardiorespiratory patients.

Amidst the pandemic a growing proportion of the general population who have left chronic conditions under- or un-addressed, and will require intensive interventions to enable them to return to self-management. Additionally, many people have sustained injuries through a variety of mechanisms but haven't yet been able to access appropriate care, during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to the general population, those most vulnerable amongst us, the elderly and those with disabilities and chronic conditions, have reported significant physical decline due to government restrictions and fear of accessing face-to-face services. We stress the importance of continuing to fund telehealth service provision to ensure ongoing care is available to those most in need.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian government work with the APA to ensure physiotherapy is consulted and informed regarding decision making and policy which affects the profession.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian government, where possible, fund initiatives to support physiotherapy students to work as allied health assistants during times of crisis.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian government consider increasing financial support for small businesses in the primary care space who are currently negatively impacted.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian government act early to alleviate many of the long term implications of the pandemic, resulting from both disease and inactivity, by ensuring adequate access to physiotherapy and promoting its role as an essential service

Recommendation 5

The APA recommends that funding for telehealth, across all funding channels, be extended permanently or at the very least, until COVID-19 restrictions are ceased.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian government support and advocate for continued access to services funded by the Commonwealth to help support Victorians during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* on behalf of the physiotherapy profession.

The physiotherapy profession is a fundamental provider of high quality, safe services for Australians of all ages in all settings and it is important they are able to access it when and how they need it. During the current pandemic, physiotherapists have shown themselves to be adaptable, capable of rapid changes to practice, and to have a large sense of responsibility to their community.

Physiotherapy is clinically effective and provides economic value in the treatment of Australians across their entire lifespan, from paediatrics to aged care, including:

- cardiorespiratory conditions
- rehabilitation of cardiac, neurological and musculoskeletal conditions
- prevention of unnecessary surgery and hospital admissions
- maintaining and improving mobility
- pain management
- falls prevention and reduction and minimising harm from falls
- musculoskeletal injuries
- pelvic health conditions
- behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia
- improved functioning and physical activity.

Background

This pandemic has had a significant impact on the whole primary care system, physiotherapy included. The current situation is placing increasing pressure on the viability of physiotherapy business in Victoria. The APA acknowledges all the efforts and supports provided by the Department to Victorian physiotherapists. These supports have enabled providers to survive in a time of significant hardship. We appeal to the Department to increase financial support for small businesses in primary care who are continuing to be negatively impacted in ongoing, challenging times.

COVID-19: Physiotherapy on the frontline

What they do

Physiotherapists play a critical role in the management of acute and chronic cardiorespiratory conditions. Working across primary care, community health and hospital settings,

physiotherapy improves physical recovery following acute illness or surgery, in ICU and acute hospital settings, as well as working in multidisciplinary teams to undertake respiratory assessment and management of intubated and spontaneously breathing patients.

Physiotherapists clear obstructed airways, maintain and improve lung volume, optimise oxygenation, and prevent respiratory complications. Physiotherapists play a leading role in respiratory care by co-ordinating and training 'proning' (positioning of intubated patients for optimal oxygenation) teams both here and overseas, to optimise patient positioning for survival.

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been shown not to respond to some interventions traditionally used to ventilate patients. As primary care practitioners, physiotherapists have been required to review evidence to develop innovative and effective treatment approaches. Physiotherapy is also crucial in the rehabilitation of survivors of COVID-19 across sub-acute and community settings, to counter the debilitating effects on strength, mobility, fatigue levels and functional performance, to facilitate a return to work and community role.

COVID-19 impact - workforce

In the early stages of the pandemic, public hospitals initiated workforce planning and preparation for a potential surge in resource requirements. Planning included targeting resources and public health interventions in anticipation of high levels of morbidity and mortality. At this time, demand for physiotherapists in ICU was predicted to be high. Given the intensity of the current second wave, the need for physiotherapists in public health remains extremely high.

Physiotherapists are an adaptable and readily available workforce to relieve the burden on the public health system. Many have been trained and prepared to assist and could:

- be diverted from private practice into public hospitals to assist with any anticipated increased demand
- treat semi-urgent patients in public or private settings – for example, those presenting with back pain, musculoskeletal and soft tissue complaints – diverted away from emergency departments to relieve the burden on hospitals
- be part of the wider public health effort with broad background skills and knowledge that could be utilised in a variety of ways

The APA continues to offer to work with the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services to communicate developments and surge workforce employment opportunities and upskill the workforce to meet the needs of the Victorian community. For example, the APA has supported the recruitment of physiotherapists to join the team of health professionals conducting COVID-19 testing, and physiotherapists have been at the forefront of public health efforts including the inner city public housing tower lockdowns.

Physiotherapists on the frontline - challenges/opportunities

Despite the availability of a strong workforce that are prepared to assist in reducing the burden on the public sector, any future plan to mobilise that workforce cannot be operationalised without Victorian Government support and coordination. There is an opportunity to explore mechanisms to use private sector physiotherapists if required in the future. This would require funding to support training programs to transition to the acute sector as demand increases.

Given the broad and at times disparate nature of the health care system in Victoria, it is vital that relevant communication is distributed as widely as possible. In the current pandemic there has at times been challenges in obtaining clear and consistent information for allied health professionals on which to base their clinical and business decision making. Physiotherapists make broad and significant contributions to the health care system and can provide expert advice in a variety of contexts and health care settings.

Recommendation: The Victorian government work with the APA to ensure physiotherapy is consulted and informed regarding decision making and policy which affects the profession.

Furthermore, strong capabilities within the physiotherapy student cohort also exist, and mechanisms to enable them to become part of the Allied Health Assistant (AHA) workforce should be considered. Several universities offer physiotherapy graduate entry programs with prior degrees as pre-requisite and often these students have prior experience and qualifications as allied health assistants. This group could provide valuable support to frontline workers, particularly as the challenges of managing COVID-19 extend beyond the short term.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government, where possible, fund initiatives to support physiotherapy students to work as allied health assistants during times of crisis

Recommendation: That the State government consider increasing financial support for small businesses in the primary care space who are currently negatively impacted.

COVID-19: physiotherapists in the community

What they do

Physiotherapists use evidence-based interventions to help people affected by injury, illness or disability through movement and exercise, manual therapy, education and advice. They

maintain health, independence and function for people of all ages, helping patients to manage pain and prevent disease and unnecessary surgery.

In Victoria, physiotherapists are also central to programs such as the Hospital Admission Risk Program (HARP) and Community Therapy Services (CTS) as well as in Community Health Centres (CHS), providing skill and expertise in managing chronic and complex conditions.

They work in homes, in residential facilities and in private practices with many vulnerable cohorts including veterans, older Australians and those in rural and remote areas. Private practice makes up the majority of the profession and is a great contributor to the health of the community and the Australian economy. In 2019-20, the size of the physiotherapy profession was about \$2.2 billion in revenue; 7000 businesses; \$1,057 million in wages paid to about 27,450 employees¹.

COVID-19 impact on consumers

The real cost of cancelled physiotherapy appointments during COVID-19 is to the health and wellbeing of patients. This includes war veterans, people with disabilities, people with work or traffic accident injuries, older Australians who ceased care in their homes or residential aged care facilities, those living in rural and remote areas and women with pelvic health issues. Those who have not continued treatment or sought treatment during this time could see severe regression in conditions that affect their mobility, function and independence. Those undergoing post-surgical rehabilitation programs who have not continued their therapy are also at risk of serve setbacks in their condition, some of which may require additional surgery to address.

Given the length of time Victoria has endured significant restrictions, there is likely to be a notable backlog of patients who sustain injuries either through trauma, or those caused by the inactivity and stress of lockdown, who will require care as services resume in both the public and private sectors. The extended length of lockdown in Victoria is likely to affect our most vulnerable citizens the hardest, and they require timely interventions to ensure they recover.

The financial cost of this mass discontinuation of care will impact significantly on Victoria from both a governmental and community perspective. It is likely that more serious and chronic conditions will develop among those whose mobility and function have declined or remained untreated during the COVID-19 period, resulting in an increased risk of hospital admissions among this population. Treatment by physiotherapists in the primary care setting can reduce the risk of worsening health status and avoidable hospitalisations.

¹ <https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/physiotherapy-services/619/>

Recommendation:

That the Victorian Government act early to alleviate many of the long term implications of the pandemic, resulting from both disease and inactivity, by ensuring adequate access to physiotherapy and promoting its role as an essential service

Telehealth – improving access to health care

There is robust evidence to support telehealth in the assessment and clinical management of disease and injury presentations. COVID-19 has demonstrated that telehealth is a safe and effective mechanism to increase access to health services, including physiotherapy, where clinically appropriate. The APA has advocated for the introduction of funding for telehealth – consultations via videoconferencing or phone – for many years, to address inequity in access to health care across Australia.

We are concerned that many Australians, particularly those people from diverse backgrounds, are not receiving adequate access to services. They include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) individuals, those living in rural and remote areas, those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual or Intersex (LGBTI), or have mobility or mental health conditions.

During COVID-19, telehealth was approved for TAC and WorkCover patients, enabling them to continue their physiotherapy care uninterrupted, and continue their return to playing active roles in society.

We welcome the initiative and would like to see access to physiotherapy via telehealth, under TAC and WorkCover, retained and extended further. For continued and universal patient access and equity, telehealth should continue to be supported across all funding channels

We know there has been a long-term maldistribution of allied health professionals in rural and regional Australia, and the negative impact that this inequity of access has on rural people. Rural and regional Australians do not have access to the same health care as their metropolitan counterparts.

It is also clear that many Victorians – whether due to mobility, pain, mental health or economic reasons – would benefit from access to telehealth consultations on an ongoing basis.

Physiotherapists are very clear that telehealth is not suitable for all clinical interventions. The APA developed extensive telehealth guidelines and a series of webinars and video resources for members to guide them in its appropriate use. The APA is also currently undertaking an extensive evaluation of the outcomes of telehealth use on patient progression to guide future application of its implementation.

As a first contact primary health care profession, patients do not need a referral from a GP to access the clinical expertise of physiotherapists, and this first contact approach should be applied in any future funding provision. Within this capacity physiotherapist may also reduce

the burden on healthcare by serving to triage and manage musculoskeletal presentations in the community.

Recommendation

The APA recommends that funding for telehealth, across all funding channels, be extended permanently or at the very least, until COVID-19 restrictions are ceased.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Despite being declared an essential service, physiotherapists in the private sector have had difficulties in obtaining access to PPE from the National Medical Stockpile. Following the directive of mandatory face masks for Victorian health workers, access to PPE, or at least face masks, is imperative. In conjunction with the costs of sanitisation, PPE comes at great financial burden to physiotherapists and threatens the financial viability of many businesses who are already under substantial financial pressure do to COVID-19.

With the current requirement for all Melbournians to wear face masks, commercially available surgical masks are in limited supply, and at inflated prices. The APA recommends that surgical masks are provided, at no cost, to Victorian physiotherapists for situations when telehealth is not possible and face-to-face service provision is required. This will ensure patients receive the appropriate and necessary care, without straining business viability.

Considerations of Commonwealth schemes that impact Victorians

The APA applauds the strong and productive relationship and decision making cohesion between the Victorian and Commonwealth governments during the COVID-19 crisis. As there are a number of schemes that are directly funded by the Commonwealth, the APA implores the Victorian government to actively support these initiatives. This includes access to Medicare funding for telehealth. A further consideration is the impact on Aged Care residents and the impacts of COVID on lack of mobility, and ultimately health, and the much needed reform in the Aged Care sector.

Recommendation

That the Victorian government support and advocate for continued access to services funded by the Commonwealth to help support Victorians during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The APA believes the Victorian government is responding effectively to contain COVID-19 and support the economy. We have identified opportunities to improve access to health care to all Victorians and to mobilise the physiotherapy workforce during the COVID-19 period. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Victorian government on any future initiatives to do so.

Australian Physiotherapy Association

The APA vision is that all Australians will have access to quality physiotherapy, when and where required, to optimise health and wellbeing, and that the community recognises the benefit of choosing physiotherapy. The APA is the peak body representing the interests of Australian physiotherapists and their patients. It is a national organisation with state and territory branches and specialty subgroups. The APA represents more than 28,000 members who conduct more than 23 million consultations each year. The APA corporate structure is one of a company limited by guarantee. The APA is governed by a Board of Directors elected by representatives of all stakeholder groups within the Association.