

Future shape of the physiotherapy workforce: Position statement

The UK physiotherapy profession needs to grow, develop and lead change for the health and care system to meet future population and patient needs in effective, sustainable ways.

Leadership

UK physiotherapy embraces a social model of healthcare that is more rehabilitative, preventative and empowering of patients and communities than current healthcare systems.

Adoption of this model is fundamental to breaking the cycle of spiralling demand and costs. Physiotherapy has a key role to play in leading and shaping how this shift happens.

Expansion

All parts of the health and care workforce need to grow to meet rising need and address current shortages.

With a population that is getting older, working longer and increasingly living with multiple long-term conditions, the number of physiotherapists (along with nurses and other allied health professionals) will need to grow at a faster rate than doctors.

Growth in the physiotherapy workforce is required at all levels of practice. This includes an increase in the numbers of advanced practice physiotherapists. This will enable the profession to expand the role it plays as patients' first point of contact and its contribution to reducing pressures on GPs and medical consultants.

There also needs to be an even greater growth in the number of support workers to meet population and patient care needs in timely, responsive ways

Development

All parts of the physiotherapy workforce will need to develop – and to be supported in this development - to work to the height of their capabilities and to let go of roles that can be performed as effectively by others.

Particular areas for development, building on physiotherapists' existing knowledge and skills, include providing expert advice, supporting patient self-management and behaviour change, using healthcare technologies to deliver responsive, accessible care, and stratifying care and caseload management according to patient need.

In addition, physiotherapists will need to assert and use their skills to lead service delivery and improvement, demonstrate the value and impact of their services, and support the learning and development of others who can deliver safe, effective care where this can enhance patient access, experience and outcomes.

More physiotherapists will need to be more confident in practising as first-contact practitioners within multi-professional teams and being accountable for managing high levels of complexity, risk and uncertainty. More broadly, they will need to be confident in mapping and asserting their knowledge and skills against multi-professional capabilities to demonstrate their ability to take on an increasing diversity of roles.

Support workers will need to play a more direct and hands-on role in patient care and the recovery process, with increased delegation from physiotherapists and a greater role in educating and advising patients and carers.

Valuing generalists as much as specialists

It will become increasingly important for physiotherapists to develop and use generalist skills and to work in generalist practitioner roles, including at advanced and expert levels. This includes to support people living with a range of long-term conditions, practise in primary care, deliver rehabilitation in community and domiciliary settings, and contribute to emergency and urgent care.

While physiotherapy specialists (including at advanced/expert levels) will still be needed, physiotherapy generalists will need to increase in number and be valued on a par with specialists.

This will require a culture shift for the profession, reflected in and supported by education.

Generic roles v skill mix

The CSP sees the development of generic AHP support worker and AHP/nurse manager roles as a largely positive development for patients and services. However, the CSP does not believe that the same would be true for generic therapist and nurse-therapist roles. Expertise and value would be lost if the professions were treated interchangeably.

Physiotherapists must be able to demonstrate and articulate the value of their distinctive professional expertise, and to share this expertise with others.

Within service delivery teams, the skill mix needs to be determined by the model of care and how patient needs can best be met.

This needs to include increased levels of inter-professional flexibility and collaboration, recognising that the different professions have overlapping capabilities, and that members of more than one profession can fulfil particular job role requirements

Working more in the community in multi-disciplinary teams, physiotherapists will need to develop and draw on more remote forms of peer-to-peer support from within the profession, while practising and learning alongside colleagues from other professions and parts of the workforce on a day-to-day basis.

Funding for the future

The CSP believes that the NHS and social care is suffering from chronic underfunding. This is pushing up acute costs and undermining efforts to make necessary changes for the future.

We believe that there is an urgent need for UK governments to agree a new funding settlement to invest in the development of services and the workforce required to deliver them.

Conclusion

The healthcare workforce has always needed to evolve in response to changing healthcare needs.

The physiotherapy workforce now has a pivotal role to play in leading and delivering healthcare that is responsive to patient care needs in sustainable, effective ways. This requires expansion of the physiotherapy workforce, at all levels.

This is not expansion to do more of the same, but expansion to develop roles and capabilities in line with the health and care needs of the future population.