

GUIDELINES



PHYSIOTHERAPY NZ GUIDELINES

For the use of physiotherapy assistants/support workers

By Janet Copeland, Senior Research and Policy Advisor, September 2012



PHYSIOTHERAPY NEW ZEALAND | MOVEMENT FOR LIFE
Kōwhiri Aotearoa

www.physiotherapy.org.nz



Contents

Background	3
Accountability	3
Responsibilities of the registered physiotherapist	4
Responsibilities of the employer	4
Responsibilities of the physiotherapy assistant/support worker	5
Delegation	5
Supervision	6
Communication	7
Specific Task Assignment	7
Tasks that must never be delegated	8
Glossary of Terms	9
References	10
Appendix 1	10
Appendix 2	10



Background

There are increasing and changing demands for services provided by physiotherapists due to demographic changes in the population, altered patterns of health and disease (with an increased prevalence of chronic diseases), improved technology and increased consumer expectations and resources.

A consequence of these pressures in our health system has been the increased utilisation of assistant/support workers to augment the role of physiotherapists, and meet patient/client (and team) outcomes by undertaking some of the duties that require less developed skills. Traditionally assistant/support workers were employed in the hospital system but they are now widely used in residential care facilities and as part of community teams. Assistant/support workers are not regulated and do not have standardised educational preparation although workplace specific training is given. They are likely to have an increasing role in the delivery of health services in the future and it is important guidelines are developed to ensure consistency of practice and safety for the health consumer.

The assistant/support worker may be drawn from a range of workers. The roles and titles of these workers will vary according to the environment in which they work. There is currently no national consensus on a single name for this group of workers and their title may include but is not limited to:

- Physiotherapy assistant
- Allied health assistant
- Rehabilitation assistant
- Physiotherapy aide
- Health care assistant
- Mobility assistant

NB: The term physiotherapy assistant/support worker has been used throughout this document.

Accountability

Physiotherapy assistant/support workers are accountable for their actions and accountable to their employer. They must therefore have the appropriate skills and knowledge to undertake activities that are delegated and supervised by a registered physiotherapist. They are also accountable to the policies and procedures of the organisation/practice where they are employed. Physiotherapy assistant/support workers must not lead health consumers to believe they are a physiotherapist when undertaking aspects of physiotherapy care. The patient should be informed of the boundaries and specificities of their role.

However it must be noted that the physiotherapist is always directly accountable for the physiotherapy care the patient/client receives regardless of what the physiotherapy assistant/support worker does with the patient. The physiotherapist is still directly accountable for ensuring that the physiotherapy assistant/support worker has the necessary knowledge and skill level to perform the delegated task.



Responsibilities of the registered physiotherapist

(The scope of practice of physiotherapists can be found in Appendix 1.)

The patient/client must have a treatment plan developed by a registered physiotherapist who has undertaken a comprehensive assessment before any physiotherapy treatment can be delegated.

The registered physiotherapist must determine the level of skill and knowledge required to ensure the safety, comfort and security of the health consumer before delegating care. This must be based on the complexity of the care required rather than the tasks (activities) to be performed.

The registered physiotherapist in conjunction with the other medical staff must provide ongoing monitoring of the health status/needs of the patient/client for whom he/she is responsible. This must be planned along with the necessary support and guidance that will be provided to the physiotherapy assistant/support worker performing the delegated activity.

Responsibilities of the Employer

An organisation/practice is not legally able to employ a physiotherapy assistant/support worker to undertake physiotherapy tasks without designating a supervising physiotherapist to assess the patient/client develop a treatment plan and direct and supervise the physiotherapy assistant/support workers programmes. The physiotherapist must be employed/contracted for sufficient hours to allow them to undertake the work to the required standard.

The organisation/practice is responsible for ensuring the physiotherapy assistant/support worker:

- Understands their boundaries and is not put in a position where they are expected to take on duties that require a registered physiotherapist.
- Meets the required ethical, professional, confidentiality standards and code of conduct of the organisation.
- Has an active working knowledge of cultural safety and the principles of cultural competence.
- Is clearly identifiable as a physiotherapy assistant/support worker by patient/clients, their family/whanau and other health professionals.
- Is employed to a specific job description and holds a copy of it.
- Has the necessary training to meet the identified and agreed competencies for the organisation and designated role.
- Is informed who their supervising physiotherapist is when they commence work.
- Knows how to contact the registered physiotherapist at all times, and knows who to go to for help if the physiotherapist is not available,



Responsibilities of the physiotherapy assistant/support worker

The physiotherapy assistant/support worker

- Informs the registered physiotherapist if they have not been trained to perform an activity.
- Does not accept any direction or delegation from another health professional for physiotherapy related tasks.
- Informs the registered physiotherapist if the delegated task appears more complex or if they are uncertain of the requirements or the health consumer's response at any stage of the activity.
- Does not offer physiotherapy advice to patients/clients not allocated to their caseload.

Delegation

The process of delegation involves allocating work to a physiotherapy assistant/support worker who then has responsibility for the completion of that task. In this situation the physiotherapy assistant/support worker is responsible for completion of the task however the physiotherapist retains legal accountability for ensuring the physiotherapy assistant/support worker has the necessary knowledge, skills and support to safely undertake the delegated task.

The principles of delegation

1. The decision to delegate a component of the patient/client's physiotherapy care is a professional judgment made by a registered physiotherapist and should take into account the:

- Health status of the patient/client;
- Complexity of the delegated activity;
- Context of care;
- Level of knowledge, skill and experience of the assistant/support worker to perform the delegated activity. Qualifications for physiotherapy assistant/support workers are being developed; attainment of these will give a clearer indication of the individual's knowledge and skills.

2. The decision to delegate must be consistent with the organisation/practice policies and service specifications.

3. The registered physiotherapist must ensure that the physiotherapy assistant/support worker who has been delegated the activity:

- Understands the delegated activity
- Has received clear direction, and indicated they have understood the delegated activity
- Knows who and under what circumstances they should ask for assistance
- Knows when and to whom they should report.

4. The registered physiotherapist is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of delegated physiotherapy care.

5. If the registered physiotherapist has made a professional judgment that delegation of treatment is inappropriate, she or he must communicate (and document) this to the physiotherapy assistant/support worker and the employer and propose a plan to ensure physiotherapy is provided to the client/resident.



Two essential components in the relationship between the physiotherapist and the physiotherapy assistant/support worker to whom the task is assigned are supervision and communication.

Supervision

Please refer to the Appendix 1 for the definition of supervision as used in this document

A physiotherapist assigning tasks to a physiotherapy assistant/support worker is responsible for supervising the individual performing the task. . It is essential that the supervising physiotherapist therefore be responsible for setting, encouraging and evaluating the standard of work performed by the physiotherapy assistant/support worker to ensure that the worker is able to safely, effectively, efficiently and competently perform each task.

The nature of this supervisory relationship may be direct or indirect, or may be a combination of the two. In determining the amount, form, quality and type of supervision required in performance of the task, the physiotherapist must take into account several factors:

- Practice setting and type;
- Nature of the task;
- Acuity of the patient/client's condition;
- Complexity of the patient/client's needs;
- Degree of judgment/decision making required for modification of treatment based on the patient's response.

These factors must be considered in context with education, training, skills, job experience, personal attributes, abilities and competence of the assistant/support worker.

It is expected that physiotherapists will not assign any task they have not previously observed (either personally or by another physiotherapist) the physiotherapy assistant/support worker performing competently.

In all cases, the physiotherapist must exercise his/her best clinical judgment to provide the physiotherapy assistant/support worker with the appropriate mix of direct and indirect supervision as required.

- In situations where indirect supervision is applied, it is reasonable and expected that the supervising physiotherapist be readily available (by pager, telephone etc.) or in the same physical area as the physiotherapy assistant/support worker for consultation, if the need arises. The physiotherapy assistant/support worker knows who to go to for help if the physiotherapist is not available.

The physiotherapist remains responsible, accountable and liable for the quality of the supervision provided to the physiotherapy assistant/support worker.



Communication

Communication is an essential component in the relationship between the physiotherapist, the physiotherapy assistant/support worker and the patient. Physiotherapists and physiotherapy assistant/support workers need to communicate with each other, (at minimum), regarding the following:

- Relevant assessment findings, goals, interventions planned, acceptable range of treatments and the expected response.
- Potential changes in the patient/client's condition that are consistent with the normal course of recovery.
- How to recognize, respond and report to the physiotherapist (or other appropriate individual) any observed changes in the patient/client's health status during or as a result of the physiotherapy intervention.
- Any concerns the physiotherapy assistant/support worker may have regarding the patient/client or delegated task.

It is important to ensure that the physiotherapy assistant/support worker understands the instructions and the limitations/scope of his/her clinical practice as identified in their position description and competency assessment. The physiotherapist must be accessible to the physiotherapy assistant/support worker should questions or concerns arise.

Specific Task Assignment

With respect to specific task assignment:

- Physiotherapists are always responsible for completing an initial assessment and preparing a physiotherapy care plan.
- Physiotherapy assistant/support workers, with the patient's consent, may carry out portions of this physiotherapy care plan for *medically stable* patients/clients.
- Physiotherapists must engage in a documented process to ensure that the physiotherapy assistant/support workers are **competent to carry out** the tasks prior to assigning them.
- The nature of tasks that can be appropriately delegated to physiotherapy assistant/support workers (i.e. shared responsibilities), should be of a more ongoing, observational and assistive nature rather than of an independent or evaluative nature and may include:
 - Implementing therapeutic interventions as assigned by the physiotherapist and may include thermal (e.g. hot and cold packs), electrical gym equipment e.g. treadmills and mechanical modalities, or providing physical assistance
 - (supporting or enhancing in nature) to patients/clients including providing instructions in using equipment (e.g. crutches);
 - Reinforcing the physiotherapist's explanation and providing verbal instructions to the patient/client regarding the intervention plan;
 - Providing the physiotherapist with feedback on the specific interventions in relation to identified patient/client outcomes;
 - Participating in the collection of qualitative and quantitative client data related to the patient/clients physical status and functional ability as assigned by the physiotherapist;
 - Performing selected objective measures/tests/procedures as assigned by the physiotherapist within established guidelines and limits and which supplement the



- patient/client history and systems review performed by the physiotherapist in concordance with the overall (re)assessment plan;
- Documenting their intervention within the established guidelines, policies and procedure of the practice setting and collecting relevant statistics whilst complying with applicable legislation and regulations. ;
- Performing any task that contributes to a safe and effective practice environment that supports a patient/client-centred delivery of physiotherapy services

It is important to emphasise that the delegation of duties and transfer of care from physiotherapists to physiotherapy assistant/support workers must be within that individual physiotherapy assistant/support worker's level of competence and take into account the factors mentioned earlier.

Tasks that must never be delegated

The types of tasks that *must not* be delegated are considered to be of an evaluative nature and/or require ongoing clinical judgement and include:

- Interpretation of referrals, diagnosis or prognosis;
- Assessment of the patient/client;
- Interpretation of assessment findings, treatment procedures and goals of treatment;
- Planning, initiation or modification of treatment program beyond established limits;
- Discussion of treatment rationale, clinical findings and prognosis with the client/family;
- Documentation that should appropriately be completed by a physiotherapist, however in some settings the physiotherapy assistant/support worker is expected to document in the patient's records they have carried out the delegated task;
- Discharge planning – however the physiotherapy assistant/support worker could be responsible for instructing the patient/client on the use of a walking aid (having previously demonstrated their competency for the task). The patient/client could then be discharged;
- Any task or procedure that requires continuous clinical judgement e.g. any intervention that has an evaluative component that immediately influences the treatment programme;
- Therapeutic modalities e.g. ultra sound that require clinical judgement with dosage.



Glossary of Terms

Accountability

Being answerable for your decisions and actions.

Assessment

A systematic procedure for collecting qualitative and quantitative data to describe progress and ascertain deviations from expected outcomes and achievements.

Competence

The combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and abilities that underpin effective performance as a physiotherapist.

Delegation

The transfer of responsibility for the performance of an activity from one person to another with the former retaining accountability for the outcome.

Patient/Client

This term includes health consumer and people living in residential care facilities and/or their families/whanau/representatives or significant others

Physiotherapy assistant/support worker

A person employed within a health care, residential or community context who undertakes a component of physiotherapy care and is not regulated in law by a regulatory authority.

Health practitioner

Health practitioner or *practitioner* means a person who is, or is deemed to be, registered with an authority as a practitioner of a particular health profession

Supervision

In the context of this document supervision is the direct or indirect oversight of a physiotherapy assistant/support worker by a physiotherapist and involves regular meetings and ongoing monitoring.



References

Australian Physiotherapy Association (2008) **Working with a Physiotherapy Assistant or Other Support Worker**

Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators (2000) **National Guidelines for Support Workers in Physiotherapy Practice in Canada**

Nursing Council of New Zealand (2011) **Guideline: delegation of care by a registered nurse to a health care assistant**

Physiotherapy New Zealand (2005) **Roles and Responsibilities of: The Physiotherapy Assistant, the Supervising Physiotherapist, and the Employer**

Appendix 1

General Scope of Practice: Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy provides services to individuals and populations to develop, maintain, restore and optimise health and function throughout the lifespan. This includes providing services to people compromised by ageing, injury, disease or environmental factors. Physiotherapy identifies and maximises quality of life and movement potential by using the principles of promotion, prevention, treatment/intervention, habilitation and rehabilitation. This encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, and social well being.

Physiotherapy involves the interaction between physiotherapists, patients/clients, other health professionals, families/whanau, care givers, and communities. This is a people-centred process where needs are assessed and goals are agreed using the knowledge and skills of physiotherapists.

Physiotherapists are registered health practitioners who are educated to practise autonomously by applying scientific knowledge and clinical reasoning to assess, diagnose and manage human function.

The practice of physiotherapy is not confined to clinical practice, and encompasses all roles that a physiotherapist may assume such as patient/client care, health management, research, policy making, educating and consulting, wherever there may be an issue of public health and safety.

Appendix 2

Training programmes

Career force offer:

- Foundation Skills Level 2
- Core Competencies Level 3 and the
- Allied Health Assistant will be available soon.

<http://www.careerforce.org.nz>