



Critical Gaps in Physical Therapy in the United States of America: Exploring the Shortage and Schedule A Classification

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the critical role physical therapists play in the United States healthcare system, particularly in managing musculoskeletal conditions. It discusses the rigorous educational requirements to become a licensed physical therapist, the increasing demand for these professionals due to the aging population, and the challenges they face, including operational costs, patient care, and burnout. The article also addresses the effects of physical therapy being classified as a Schedule A occupation and how it can be leveraged to improve staffing. It also offers strategies to improve reimbursement rates, reduce burnout, and enhance the quality of care. It concludes by emphasizing the need for advocacy, research, and collaboration to advance the profession. The scope for future study is to promote cash-based care versus insurance-based care to reduce insurance influence by insurance companies and improve revenue.

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Introduction

Physical therapists play a crucial role in the United States and act as the front runner for most healthcare conditions related to the musculoskeletal system. In some states with direct access, physical therapists treat patients without a physician's supervision by performing clinically relevant diagnosis, forming a plan of care for the patient and treating them as clinically appropriate or referring them to appropriate care partners [1]. In the states that do not allow direct access, physical therapists work under the supervision of a physician, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant. They can work across different settings including skilled nursing homes, assisted living, outpatient therapy, and hospital-based care. A physical therapist's role in the field of medicine and rehabilitation to improve patient outcomes has been indispensable and without a doubt plays a critical role in improving patient quality of life and keeping healthcare costs down in the United States.

What does it take to become a licensed physical therapist?

Physical therapists are passionate and caring health professionals who help their patients get better, not only get better but also improve their quality of life, self-confidence, and reduce pain. In the current day scenario to become a physical therapist, an individual must graduate with a bachelor's degree, go through a clinical doctorate program for three years, and fulfill state-specific requirements after passing an intense national examination to become eligible for licensure. It is not only many years of education but also the psychological pressure of clearing the boards and for most aspirant therapists it's about paying off their tuition loans. On average, a physical therapist takes 10-20 years to pay off the student debt [2]. This number can vary based on multiple nuances associated with the individual. While the cost of a Doctor of Physical Therapy program is high, there are very few

accredited PT programs in the U.S. leading to high competition and a smaller number of available seats.

Demand for Physical Therapy

The U.S. has a large aging population, and it is predicted that by 2040, the geriatric population in the U.S. would be close to 80 million [3]. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, the demand for physical therapists is estimated to grow by 21% between 2020-2030 [4]. According to the Department of Labor Statistics in 2021, the U.S. had ~233,000 physical therapists. This number and the predicted numbers do not meet the future demand needs which are predicted.

Challenges Faced by Therapists in the Profession

1. Increased Operational Costs and Reduced Revenue

Unlike other professions, the medical field must follow insurance and Medicare guidelines for reimbursements. These rates can vary depending on state legislation, company, and insurance contracts, etc. But also, the insurances and Medicare can deny these charges based on their own assessments stating they might not be medically necessary. Insurance reimbursement guidelines and denials make it difficult for physical therapy companies to hire the appropriate number of therapists and expect more patients to be treated by therapists and high productivity requirements. These reimbursement rules are difficult to navigate for larger corporations but can still survive. Unfortunately, it becomes difficult for smaller companies and single clinic owners to survive these changes [5].

2. Lack Of Access and Poor Patient Care

Higher out-of-pocket costs can lead to patients opting to reduce the frequency of treatment, leading to required treatment not

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being administered to the patient affecting recovery and repetitive recurrence of the issue leading to increased healthcare costs.

3. Compromised Quality of Care

Due to lower reimbursement rates and the expectation to see more patients, operational costs and overall revenue recovery lead to compromised quality of care, increased duration of the treatment plan, and job dissatisfaction and burnout for therapists already in the field [6].

4. Burnouts in Physical Therapists

Burnouts are extremely common in physical therapists not only due to physical strains but also emotional burden. This can be exacerbated by the increased administrative burden due to excessive documentation, navigating insurance documents, and reimbursement issues which can be stressful. These burnouts can lead to high attrition rates and professionals leaving the profession [1].

Schedule A Occupation

Schedule A occupation is a category of jobs labeled by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to have a shortage of qualified workers in the United States. This helps employers expedite the Permanent residency process for employers by bypassing labor certification. Even though these immigration leniencies help with some hiring of physical therapists, it still is not sufficient for meeting the demand in the United States [7].

To properly support and train these foreign-trained therapists, an adequate support system and orientation system should be provided so they can adapt to the healthcare culture with successful integration into the workforce. Further improvements can be made to all Schedule A occupations by providing reservations for green cards (permanent residency) for these occupations and separating them from other occupations to tackle the shortage. Moreover, priority or reservation can also be provided for underserved areas for licensed Schedule A occupations to reduce labor shortages.

Discussion to Tackle These Challenges

To tackle these challenges and meet healthcare demands, it is important to determine the appropriate reimbursement for these services. Figuring out appropriate reimbursement rates will help therapists and companies provide better treatment for patients, reduce burnout by providing appropriate care needed without the need to reduce treatment times to see more volumes of patients. This will in turn reduce the recovery time of patients, improving quality of care and life while reducing the number of sessions and reducing healthcare costs.

Reducing the strain on the healthcare system will reduce burnout in therapists, which not only includes physical but also mental stress. This in turn will reduce burnout rates and the number of therapists leaving the profession. With reduced burden and improved revenue, companies and therapists will have the potential to invest back in the community while mentoring and taking on new PT students for observation and training. The aspirant therapists learning from these therapists will have a positive experience. This is possible if more time and resources are dedicated towards this cause.

Even though the need for foreign-trained therapists will still be required in certain rural areas, changing these internal levers will help train U.S.-trained therapists and reduce the need for foreign-trained therapists. When needed, the companies can invest in foreign-trained therapists as needed for the immigration process. This will be easier with improved reimbursements and improved revenue.

Improved reimbursement will help companies pay their employees better. Aspirant therapists will study the pay structure in the market and may be able to invest more into schools for tuition. Funding for education and scholarships could be made available to aspirant therapists to promote the field. This will also reduce the need for student loans and will help students to consider taking a step into the profession.

Leveraging Resources for Advocacy and Research

With more funds available for bigger organizations, funds could be dedicated towards advocacy towards better policy changes that will benefit physical therapy as a profession, education, and practice. This will act as a loop where positive reimbursement will lead to advocacy and circle back to better reimbursements.

Collaboration can also be achieved with healthcare companies and educational institutions to improve technology, latest research based on current and future needs and predictions in the field to improve the value of the profession.

Conclusion

The role of physical therapists in the healthcare system is pivotal, particularly as the population ages and the demand for musculoskeletal care increases. Despite the challenges posed by operational costs, patient care limitations, and professional burnout, there are clear paths forward to address these issues. By advocating for appropriate reimbursement rates, reducing the strain on therapists, and investing in both domestic and foreign-trained professionals, the physical therapy field can continue to thrive. Leveraging resources for advocacy, research, and collaboration will further strengthen the profession, ensuring that physical therapists can provide the highest quality care while maintaining a sustainable and fulfilling career. These efforts will not only benefit therapists but will also contribute to better patient outcomes and a more efficient healthcare system overall.

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