

Diversity and inclusion

Policy statement

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Diversity and inclusion

There is strong global action towards improving diversity and inclusion in order to provide equitable healthcare for all people(1). Providing the “highest attainable standard of health” is recognised as “a fundamental right of every human being”(2, 3). World Physiotherapy recognises and supports the international declarations and work programmes of the United Nations and World Health Organization in support of diversity and inclusion(4-10). Recognising and including different experiences, opinions, skills, and abilities enriches individuals and organisations(11, 12).

Diversity encompasses ability, age, culture, ethnicity, gender, indigeneity, race, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and other factors such as, educational background, health status, occupation and personality traits. The outcomes of most discussions on diversity and inclusion, agree that improving them requires meaningful and ongoing involvement of people who have received systematic discrimination and marginalisation. Further, inclusion involves positive action towards reducing inherent biases and assumptions that influence the way people behave and interpret situations. Increasing diversity and inclusion ultimately works towards ensuring equity.

World Physiotherapy is committed to diversity and inclusion in its activities and recognises these are areas where further progress is needed more broadly in the profession, and society as a whole not just in healthcare, to foster greater equity for all people.(13-16) World Physiotherapy promotes strategies to increase diversity, inclusion and equity across physiotherapy including in policy, education, professional and employment practices, and research. Further, as an organisation World Physiotherapy is committed to ensuring a diverse and inclusive workplace for its employees.

In a physiotherapy context, those developing standards of education and practice need to actively engage people from underrepresented communities in order to ensure diversity within the profession, and to provide a foundation for an inclusive environment. Physiotherapists should be equipped to embrace diversity in any interactions they have with others. Understanding how social inequality, advantage and disadvantage operate, their consequences and how to address these issues(17) are ethical responsibilities(18) of physiotherapists and physiotherapy organisations. Lack of inclusive policies can make clinical services inaccessible for some people and the profession may not be inclusive in terms of educating and supporting employment for those from minority groups.

World Physiotherapy recognises that contextual variations and significant co-existing diversity considerations significantly contribute to the complexity of implementing diversity and inclusion strategies. There is the potential for unintended consequences with well-meaning implementation of policies when such complexities are not recognised.(19, 20) Contextual variations can include, for example, different national legislations that affect legal and social practices, cultural norms and socio-economic factors. Different groups of people receive discrimination in different circumstances, and the same groups can be discriminated against differently. There are considerable individual variations within particular ‘groups’ and some people are discriminated against for two or more factors, such as gender, ethnicity and age.(21). As a result, policies promoting inclusion need to be relevant to the specific needs of the communities they serve, while being agile enough to account for individual differences and future changes.

World Physiotherapy recommends that member organisations:

Across all areas

- foster environments which actively encourage the elimination of discrimination by developing, implementing, promoting/endorsing, evaluating and monitoring inclusive policies, procedures, standards of practice, and codes of conduct
- foster environments that enable physiotherapists to be their true selves with a feeling of belonging
- develop local diversity and inclusion policies and action plans in all physiotherapy settings including clinical, governance, management, research and education
- develop diversity and inclusion resources specific to the physiotherapy profession
- positively influence perceptions and good practice within the profession, and in how physiotherapists interact with all individuals: patients, clients, populations, other health and social care professionals, and each other
- encourage ongoing reflection about the assumptions and norms within the physiotherapy profession, including considering ways in which the profession (intentionally or unintentionally) may discriminate against, marginalise and/or exclude certain people or groups of people
- create leadership roles within associations to promote diversity and inclusion practices in the profession
- involve people whose views have previously been marginalised to ensure diversity issues are recognised and addressed
- include people from relevant diverse backgrounds in governance activities and when developing policy

Amongst physiotherapists (eg in professional bodies, education settings, workplaces)

- encourage employment of people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences across all facets of the profession, particularly in middle to senior positions to ensure appropriate leadership and sustainable change
- build capacity by accessing diversity and inclusion training provided by dedicated organisations experienced in delivering training to health and social service contexts
- support research that considers elements of diversity, inclusion and equity in physiotherapy contexts, and include members of marginalised groups within the research teams

For patients/service delivery

- work towards equity of access to high quality physiotherapy services for groups who are at risk of discrimination (18, 22), and recognise that at times there may need to be extra efforts for these groups(23), as they have often not had equitable access to services
- build capacity, confidence and competence for physiotherapists to deliver equitable care to diverse populations by developing strong knowledge, reflective practice skills and communication strategies in physiotherapist entry-level and continuing professional education programmes

Broader advocacy and social change

- address broader social determinants of health by advocating for social and political change towards greater equity in society in general, including those from minority groups in these initiatives
- work with other organisations and institutions to promote and implement positive diversity and inclusion policies, procedures, and standards of practice

- consider how physiotherapists (as individuals or organisations) can engage with external institutional and government stakeholders in order to facilitate the development of initiatives, policies, and legislation that are reflective of good practice in diversity and inclusion

Glossary (<https://world.physio/resources/glossary>)

Diversity

Inclusion

Equity

Approval, review and related policy information	
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Related World Physiotherapy policies:	World Physiotherapy policy statements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical principles and the responsibilities of physiotherapists and member organisations

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