

Direct access and patient/client self-referral to physiotherapy

Policy statement

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The World Physiotherapy advocates that direct access to physiotherapy and patient/client self-referral will allow service users to meet their physiotherapy goals. Physiotherapy professional entry-level education prepares physiotherapists to be primary contact autonomous practitioners, able to examine/assess, evaluate, diagnose, intervene/treat, determine outcomes and discharge patients/clients without referral from another health professional (eg medical practitioner) or other third party. (1) Further, World Physiotherapy advocates for service developments and delivery models that allow patients/clients improved access to physiotherapy services through the ability to refer themselves directly to a physiotherapist.

The terms direct access and patient self-referral refer to the circumstances where physiotherapy services are available to patients/clients without the requirement of a referral. (2) In many health service delivery systems throughout the world, the users of physiotherapy services do not require such a referral. (3) In these instances, direct access to physiotherapy services is supported by national/provincial/regional/state legislative frameworks and by the standards of professional practice of physiotherapists. A growing body of research evidence supports the clinical and cost effectiveness of such services and their acceptability among service users. (4-12)

Some World Physiotherapy member organisations have published comprehensive reports on the value of physiotherapy. (13, 14)

World Physiotherapy advocates for the right of those seeking physiotherapy services to self-refer to a physiotherapist if they so desire and believes that this right promotes the autonomy of users of physiotherapy services and enables fair and equitable access to such services.

World Physiotherapy advocates for social security or health insurance reimbursement models that do not require the referral of a medical practitioner before a patient/client may seek the services of a physiotherapist.

World Physiotherapy encourages member organisations to:

- advocate for direct access and patient/client self-referral with national/provincial/regional/state health departments, health professions and other organisations, such as those that provide reimbursement for physiotherapy expenses and those that represent service user groups
- ensure that physiotherapist professional entry level education programmes prepare physiotherapists as independent autonomous practitioners able to see patients/clients without a third-party referral¹
- ensure the provision of post-qualifying continuing professional development opportunities to support physiotherapists in the delivery of direct access and patient/client self-referral
- support research efforts aimed at evaluating direct access and patient/client self-referral services
- make their members aware of resources to support the implementation of direct access and patient/client self-referral services
- make their members aware of their professional, ethical and legal responsibilities when providing direct access to physiotherapy services

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

Access to physical therapy

Direct access

Self referral

Approval, review and related policy information	
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Date for review:	2027
Related World Physiotherapy policies:	World Physiotherapy policy statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autonomy• Description of physiotherapy• Standards of physiotherapist practice World Physiotherapy guideline: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physiotherapist education framework• Guideline for the development of a system of license/regulation and recognition of physiotherapists

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