Extending the Scope of Physiotherapy – An inter-professional and collaborative approach to improving patient-centred care

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BACKGROUND

Health departments around Australia are facing tremendous and immediate challenges, including workforce issues, changing community expectations, and increasing demand; all resulting in the necessity to change models of clinical service delivery. Tertiary and community health care services are exploring new ways of clinical service delivery. This has seen the introduction of new support roles and extended practice roles for nursing and allied health. Extended practice physiotherapy is an accepted role within the United Kingdom, and there is evidence from UK experiences to suggest that extended scope physiotherapy practice can improve the quality and safety of care, and effectively reduce hospital waiting lists and increase productivity by matching activities with the appropriate skill levels. This has the potential to relieve demand on more highly specialised health professionals, and increasing patient access to appropriate treatment if applied appropriately in Australia.

In 2008 ACT Health commissioned a project to explore the feasibility of introducing extended practice physiotherapy within the ACT. This project was undertaken in collaboration with the International Centre for Allied Health Evidence (iCAHE), University of South Australia.

The project aims were to:

1. Scope the published and grey literature regarding international experiences in implementing and evaluating advanced and extended scope physiotherapy practices, in part to identify:
   - Core elements of effective advanced and extended scope physiotherapy practices
   - Training requirements and opportunities for advanced and extended scope physiotherapy practitioners

On completion of phase 1, there was keen support for further investigation into extended scope physiotherapy within ED and Orthopaedics, hence the commencement of phase 2 in February 2010 to:

1. Scope and trial the processes to introduce advanced and extended scope physiotherapy practices into two areas (ED and Orthopaedic Outpatients)

This paper describes findings from phase 1 and the preliminary findings from phase 2, and provides recommendations for the way forward.

METHODS

Phase 1 comprised of two parts:

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A: iCAHE conducted an extensive systematic literature review of published research and grey literature into advanced and extended scope physiotherapy roles around the world. The literature was described in terms of hierarchy of evidence, critical flaws, country of origin, intent, focus and outcome measures.

B: Local feedback was gathered on the feasibility and practicalities of implementing advanced and extended scope physiotherapy practitioners, using a number of focus groups to assess the current practice environment and local perceptions on possible extended scope roles and tasks and potential incentives and enablers for the introduction of extended scope of practice into ACT Health.

Phase 2:
The initial step of phase 2 was to invite a multi-disciplinary team to form a Steering Group for the project, including representatives from Medical Imaging, Orthopaedic surgery, Emergency Medicine, Allied Health, Pathology, University of Canberra, ANU Medical School, consumer representation, ACT Physiotherapists registration board, the Australian Physiotherapy Association, Nursing and Midwifery and Pharmacy. The aims of the group were to consider the training and credentialing framework for the proposed Extended Scope Physiotherapy pilot roles within Orthopaedics and Emergency Medicine, establish pilot roles and an evaluation framework, develop Duty Statements and Selection Criteria for the recruitment of the proposed Extended Scope Physiotherapy pilot roles, and establish clinical support networks/teams for the ongoing assistance for the Extended Scope Physiotherapists.

RESULTS
Phase 1

A: The literature review was core to the whole project, as it provided the Steering Committee with a sound basis for its deliberations, using a synthesis of current international evidence. The literature review identified five clinical areas that could potentially benefit from extending the scope of physiotherapists in ACT Health, including Orthopaedics, Emergency Department (ED), Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Developmental delay/disability. The literature review identified that the impacts of advanced and extended Scope Practice Physiotherapy roles on patient care could be measured as a reduction in patient waiting times, a decrease in the length and number of ‘stops’ in the patient journey and timely access to appropriate treatment and investigations. Inter-professional collaboration was identified as a key component to developing and maintaining safe and effective Extended Scope Physiotherapy (ESP) models of care.

B: Common themes with regard to extension of scope were expressed across all clinical areas by the ACT public Physiotherapists; divided into three main categories:
extension of practice consultation, extension of diagnostics and extension of therapeutics – these were supported within the literature.

Phase 2

a). Job Specifications
Consistently reported in the literature are the following attributes desirable of an extended scope practice physiotherapist:

- Organisational skills
- Knowledge and aptitude
- Qualifications
- Clinical leadership

b). Education framework
Members of the Steering Committee conducted a review of the currently available relevant education programs in Australia, which highlighted that there is currently no established educational pathway for extended scope practice physiotherapists. The Steering Group agreed that an integral component of the development of extended scope physiotherapy roles in the ACT was to devise a transferable and internationally-recognised educational pathway; that provided students with access to accredited programs of education. In order to accommodate physiotherapists expanding their scope in multiple clinical areas, it is proposed that the core elements of training for extending scope of practice are:

- Pharmacology
- Radiology
- Injecting/aspirating
- Research/evaluation/management and leadership

**FUTURE WORK**

In the next six months ACT Health will complete further scoping of the Orthopaedic arm of the project, to assess the potential benefits of introducing an extended scope practitioner into this area. This work takes a particular reference to establishing if there is a role for a within scope, an advanced or an extended scope physiotherapist in this area; establishing what local barriers and enablers are present, devise a local credentialing process and assess the potential impact of such an initiative on service delivery.

The goal for the next six months in the ED arm of the project will be to devise a local credentialing process to support the formalised training program that it is proposed will be completed by the clinicians appointed to the pilot position.

ACT Health will continue to liaise with tertiary institutions on an educational pathway for extended scope physiotherapists, to design an accredited and transferable post-graduate course.

In the next six months the project team will finalise the duty statement and selection criteria and the recruitment processes to ensure that the appropriately qualified clinicians are recruited to pilot positions in 2011.

An evaluation framework will also be established during this next six months, accompanied by ethics approval, to underpin the evaluation of the roll-out of the pilot programs in ED and Orthopaedic Outpatients.

**REFERENCE**