

## Direct Access to Physical Therapy Services:

### An introduction:

The other day we treated a patient with shoulder pain. She developed this pain about six weeks ago, and she can't recall a specific injury to her shoulder.

She said she waited for her shoulder pain to go away, but it didn't, and her shoulder started feeling tight. She told us that someone told her to try physical therapy, but she wasn't sure how to proceed. She states she was not sure if she needed to see her doctor before starting therapy or if she could just go to physical therapy via direct access.

She decided to telephone her insurance company and ask about the best way to get to physical therapy. Her insurance company told her that she was able to simply find a physical therapist, make an appointment, and go. She did not need to see her doctor first.

Finally, we are getting somewhere. Wisconsin allows patients to be evaluated and treated by a physical therapist via direct access. That means that you do not need to visit your physician before seeking out a physical therapist. The problem is that patients have been under the "seek the advice of the physician as gatekeeper" model of care that not many patients know or understand what direct access is all about.

### The question and answer:

What is Direct Access to Physical Therapy? In the past my doctor prescribed physical therapy for me. Now she says that I can have direct access to physical therapy. What is direct access?

#### **Answer:**

Direct access refers to the ability of patients to be evaluated and treated by a physical therapist without being referred by a doctor or other healthcare practitioner. If you feel you have a problem that may benefit from the skilled services of a physical therapist, you may be able to refer yourself to physical therapist for treatment. Sometimes direct access is called self-referral.

In the United States, provisions for physical therapy services are governed by each individual state through a "state-practice" act. The practice act is legislation that outlines how physical therapy services will be delivered. Historically, each state's practice act provided that physical therapy services would be provided only if ordered by a licensed physician or other licensed healthcare practitioner. Each state lists different professionals who may refer patients to physical therapy, including podiatrists, dentists, and nurse practitioners.

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) has lobbied successfully in many states to help change the law to allow patients direct access to physical therapy. By having direct access in each state, physical therapists' are recognized as the licensed professionals of choice to initially manage musculoskeletal and movement disorders in patients. Wisconsin is a direct access state.

## Why is this important to me and my company?

### Why Is Direct Access Important?

Healthcare overall is expensive. It seems that with every passing year, more money is being spent on healthcare. A system that allows the patient to directly seek the services of a physical therapist can help save healthcare dollars by eliminating unnecessary tests or other specialist referrals. Many conditions can be successfully evaluated and treated with no expensive diagnostic testing.

Physical therapy is the case in point. Entry into the profession and practice of the profession are stringently regulated by all states, and as highly trained health care professionals, physical therapists have a proven track record of effectively treating millions of patients. Physical therapists are well-qualified, both through formal education and clinical training, to evaluate a patient's condition, assess his or her physical therapy needs and, if appropriate, safely and effectively treat the patient. Physical therapists are also well-qualified to recognize when patients demonstrate conditions, signs and symptoms that should be evaluated by other health care professionals before therapy is instituted. Physical therapists recognize when it is appropriate to refer patients to these other health care professionals for consultation.

Physical therapists are also trained to recognize "red flags" that may signal the need for more invasive medical intervention. In those cases, referral to your physician or healthcare provider is made immediately.

The professional training and expertise that a physical therapist has is recognized by 47 states and the District of Columbia. These states have removed the out-dated provisions requiring a referral by a physician, from their statutes. Further, these states and the insurance companies that reimburse under direct access will realize cost savings of approximately \$1,200 per patient episode of care according to the results of a recent study by Dr. Jean Mitchell and Dr. Greg deLissovoy of Georgetown University and Johns Hopkins University, respectively. Just imagine what this could mean to your state's workers' compensation program!

### Summary:

Today's environment of health consciousness, pursuit of physical fitness, and the promotion of a concept of wellness and overall prevention is tempered by the need to control the escalating costs of health care. One goal of the state legislatures in the 1990s has been the reform of the burgeoning health care system. Two areas of intense legislative focus have been how to increase access while still achieving cost containment. One of the most effective tools for cost control and increased access is easily attainable yet often overlooked and underutilized by the legislatures - that of direct access to the services provided by health care professionals.

By allowing your employees an additional entry point into the traditional medical system, increased choice in the selection of a health care professional, access to less expensive and more timely care is an extremely effective way to meet the goals of increased productivity, healthy employees and overall cost containment.

If your employees are suffering from a musculoskeletal condition that causes functional movement limitations, encourage your employees to use their best judgment when deciding which healthcare practitioner to see. A visit from your OST physical therapist is a safe place to start on the road to recovery.