

Physiotherapy education - investment in our future

New Zealand and Australian physiotherapists share a very proud history from their beginnings in the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century practitioners from our countries who offered remedial exercise, hands-on manipulation and massage, electrotherapy, radiology and hydrotherapy formed the Australasian Massage Association. It was the first such Australasian professional association, begun with the intent of ensuring high educational standards, ethical practice and registration of its practitioners. The first educational programme commenced in conjunction with the University of Melbourne in 1906. By 1907 a programme began with the University of Sydney, in 1908 with the University of Adelaide and in 1913 with the University of Otago. Over the ensuing century physiotherapy continued to develop as a clinical science with increasing demand for its well-educated practitioners. Maintaining and improving the standards of education and practice have been the avowed intention of physiotherapists, their accrediting bodies, education providers, the professional associations, leading practitioners and the legal regulating agencies.

In Australasia physiotherapists can be proud of the role they have played on the world stage. New Zealand and Australia, founding members of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) in 1951, offer all their physiotherapy education in universities, where programmes are led by professorial level internationally recognised academics with strong research. With long experience of leading and participating in the accreditation processes of the Australian Physiotherapy Council for nearly all entry level physiotherapy programmes in Australia and further accreditation and review activities internationally, I argue that it is critical that physiotherapy education sustains the highest standards and Australasia continues to be a world leader (McMeeken, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2014; Rodger, Webb, Devitt, Gilbert, Wrightson, & McMeeken, 2008). Our mission is to provide the best quality physiotherapy services to communities through our graduates and to advance knowledge in physiotherapy through ongoing research. As part of this mission senior Australasian physiotherapists support the WCPT by providing *pro bono* support to developing and accrediting physiotherapy entry level programmes throughout the Asia Western Pacific Region and beyond (Skinner, McMeeken, Stewart, Xerri de Caro, & Sykes, 2016). Over the century that physiotherapists have been educated in New Zealand and Australia, the profession has demonstrated significant levels of adaptability and responsiveness as verified by their capacity to respond to, for example, the needs of service personnel in both World Wars, the devastating poliomyelitis epidemics from the early 1900s to the 1950s and beyond, the increasing awareness of needs in women's health, and the expansion of practice in orthopaedic and emergency departments. Australasian physiotherapists are clear leaders in evidence-based practice, translating research into their clinical work.

Worldwide physiotherapy aspires to meet the WCPT's guideline for degree standard and university status (WCPT, 2017). The Confederation recommends that education for entry level physical therapists be based on university or university level studies of a minimum of four years, independently

validated and accredited as being at a standard that affords graduates full statutory and professional recognition. We worked hard to achieve all our education within universities which have understood our educational requirements. Our current international status reflects the fact that our physiotherapists are educated within university systems where such education is underpinned by research and advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, the biomedical sciences necessary for physiotherapy education continue to require access to the highest levels of human anatomy, physiology, pathology, biomechanics and exercise science. Physiotherapy specific laboratories for sophisticated movement analysis, cardiorespiratory function testing and women's and men's health assessment are also necessary to enable students to transition to graduation and further into advanced clinical specialisation and doctoral research.

Tertiary education for physiotherapists is regulated by accreditation bodies and for the profession through national registration and further examination for specialist practice. The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Act (1997) provides for mutual recognition of qualifications between Australia and New Zealand. In August 2015, the separate Physiotherapy Boards of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand announced that the National Physiotherapy Practice Thresholds would be shared (New Zealand Physiotherapy Board, 2015). These bi-national thresholds define the professional ethics, theoretical knowledge and clinical skills that are required of entry-level physiotherapists to be registered to practise. In Australia, physiotherapists are regulated by the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act. Physiotherapists must be registered with the Physiotherapy Board of Australia to practise (www.physiotherapyboard.gov.au/). In Aotearoa New Zealand, physiotherapists are regulated by the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003 and to practise must be registered with the Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand (www.physioboard.org.nz/).

Accreditation of educational programmes is also a quality assurance process, which uses all aspects of review and assessment according to pre-defined standards. Accreditation of a physiotherapist professional entry level education programme gives a status to that programme demonstrating that it meets the international standard set by the WCPT.

Physiotherapists are specialists in the analysis and treatment of disorders of human movement in all body systems. As primary contact practitioners physiotherapists have the responsibility of clinical decision making regarding the health and well-being of patients who seek their expertise. This level of professional practice requires a rigorous training in the medical sciences combined with a fully integrated programme of clinical education. Universities contemplating mounting a suite of physiotherapy educational and research programmes need to undertake a comprehensive workforce analysis to provide evidence of need for such programmes. The latest available information for physiotherapists in Victoria Australia demonstrates that demand is primarily driven by population growth and population ageing, changes in medical and surgical practices and advances in fields such as ergonomics and

occupational health and safety. Physiotherapists required are those with experience and not new graduates (Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO), 2016). The Strategic Workforce Services Workforce Assessment Report District Health Board Physiotherapy Workforce (Central Region's Technical Advisory Services Limited, 2017) report an increasing demand for physiotherapists, citing similar reasons to the 2016 ANZSCO report and state that whilst the number of graduates is increasing, the substantial issue is the inability to recruit and retain experienced physiotherapists.

My experience of more than two decades on the Australian Physiotherapy Council and in reviewing and accrediting international programmes indicates that new educational providers in physiotherapy require the support and facilities of the highest university level of pedagogical and administrative understanding, a strong human biomedical sciences faculty, suitable facilities and an active research culture that is already aligned with aspects of physiotherapy research. Students benefit from interactions with fellow students in congruent disciplines. Leadership should be at professorial level by a physiotherapist of international standing, with sufficient postgraduate qualified physiotherapists to lead each of the physiotherapy specialist areas. Furthermore unless there is comprehensive and reliable clinical education by experienced clinical educators, whose practice is evidence informed and who have strong collaborations with the universities, the anticipated programmes will fail.

From its beginning in December 1905, the Australasian Massage Association produced clear goals of registration, a university standard of training and examination and promotion of the interests of the profession (Australian Physiotherapy Association History Collections, 1905). Initially physiotherapists deferred to medical men to build on their previous experience in developing professions and to ensure the patronage from the medical faculties at the universities (The Advertiser, 1908). With increasing autonomy in clinical practice and advances in physiotherapy-specific knowledge both countries rescinded the medical referral ethic in the mid-1970s – the first countries in the world to do so. They promoted physiotherapy as a specialised branch of science. The successors of the Australasian Massage Association, the Australian Physiotherapy Association and Physiotherapy New Zealand, have continued to advocate for excellence in education, clinical practice and in service to communities.

In the early 1990s I brought together the leaders of all physiotherapy programmes in New Zealand and Australia, now the Council of Deans of Physiotherapy (CPDANZ). Membership of CPDANZ requires that all programmes represented have met accreditation standards of at least a 4-year Bachelor degree at a university with appropriate physiotherapy leadership. The number of programmes has increased in Australia since the early 1990's and the student intake in the New Zealand programmes has also increased. I reiterate that factors critical to accreditation have been the need to ensure professorial leadership, research capacity and facilities, faculty who have the requisite knowledge and skills and the breadth and depth of clinical placements necessary for graduates. 'CPDANZ members continue to be proud flagbearers of the high standards of physiotherapy

education in Australasia and are working together to ensure these are retained and built upon to meet the future needs of the profession' (Professor Sandra Brauer, Head of Physiotherapy, The University of Queensland. Australia, President Council of Physiotherapy Deans Australia and New Zealand, personal communication, 2017).

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