Working with a Physiotherapy Assistant or Other Support Worker

Background
The global work force shortage of allied health professionals is impacting on the recruitment and retention of health professionals such as physiotherapists. At the same time there are increasing demands for services provided by physiotherapists due to changing demographics, altered patterns of health and disease, improved technology and increased consumer expectations and resources.

A consequence of these pressures in our health system has been the increased utilisation of support workers to augment the role of physiotherapists by undertaking some of the duties that require less developed skills.

A support worker, or any other person requiring supervision to assist a physiotherapist, may be drawn from a range of workers. The roles and titles of these workers will vary according to the environment in which they work. There is currently no national consensus on a single name for this group of workers and these titles may include:

- Physiotherapy assistant
- Allied health assistant
- Rehabilitation assistant
- Physiotherapy aide
- Community Assistant
- Personal care attendant
- Hydrotherapy aide
- Exercise therapist
- Therapy aide
- Sports trainer

The Australian Physiotherapy Association defines a physiotherapy assistant as a health care worker who works under the supervision of a registered physiotherapist and holds a Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance (Physiotherapy) or equivalent. These workers have a range of skills which allow a physiotherapist to confidently delegate a higher level of tasks than other support workers.

Support workers who assist physiotherapists but who do not hold the relevant Certificate IV qualification or equivalent are not deemed by the Australian Physiotherapy Association to be physiotherapy assistants. For the purposes of this paper the term support worker describes a person who has tasks delegated to them by a registered physiotherapist.

The process of delegation involves the physiotherapist allocating work to a support worker who then has responsibility for the completion of that task. In this situation the support worker is responsible for completion of the task however the registered practitioner retains accountability.
Delegating tasks to a support worker depends on the relationship that exists between that worker and the physiotherapist. There are a range of factors that a physiotherapist must consider when deciding whether an activity could appropriately be undertaken by a support worker. Principally this involves determining whether the person to whom the task is delegated has the appropriate role, level of competence, training and experience to carry it out. Physiotherapists are ultimately accountable for ensuring that the support worker has the necessary skill level to perform the delegated task.

Choosing tasks to be undertaken by support staff is a complex activity and much depends on the physiotherapist’s professional opinion. Any physiotherapist delegating tasks to a support worker must supervise the individual performing the task however the nature of this supervisory relationship may be direct or indirect, or may be a combination of the two.

In determining the amount, form, quality and type of supervision required by a support worker in performance of the task, the physiotherapist must take into account several factors. These include the practice setting and type, the nature of the task, the acuity of the patient’s condition, the complexity of the patient’s needs and the degree of judgment, decision making required for modification of treatment based on the patient’s response. These factors must be considered in context with education, training, skills, job experience, personal attributes, abilities and competence of the support worker.

A support worker may perform adjunctive roles in the delivery of the physiotherapy service or physiotherapy management plan as specified by the supervising physiotherapist.

The APA position

The Australian Physiotherapy Association recognises that it contravenes all state and territory Registration Acts in Australia for anyone other than a registered physiotherapist to use the title physiotherapist or imply that they are a physiotherapist.

The position of the Australian Physiotherapy Association is that:

- A physiotherapist is legally responsible for the delivery of all physiotherapy services and must ensure that any delegated intervention is within the support worker’s education, training, experience and skill.
- A physiotherapist is always directly accountable for a client’s physiotherapy management regardless of the amount of care provided by the support worker. If a support worker assists in the delivery of a physiotherapy service, the physiotherapist must be able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of supervision for the service provided.
- A physiotherapist must ensure that support workers behave in a manner consistent with the APA Code of Conduct and the four Ethical Principles on which the Code is based.
- If a physiotherapist is unable to demonstrate a satisfactory level of supervision for a particular service it can not be defined as physiotherapy. Notwithstanding this a support worker may engage in general health related services within his or her education, training, experience and skill whilst under the broad guidance of a physiotherapist.
- Support workers (other than physiotherapy assistants) should hold a minimum qualification of Certificate III in a field relevant to their area of work however in some circumstances equivalent on the job training may be considered adequate.
- It is deemed to be a physiotherapy consultation on any given occasion of service, for the purposes of itemisation and coding, where all elements of a consultation, as specified in the National Physiotherapy Service Descriptors are met irrespective of the involvement of a support worker or other person requiring supervision.
References:
2. Supervision, accountability and delegation of activities to support workers: A guide for registered practitioners and support workers, Chartered Society of Physiotherapy