Fast Facts – Physiotherapy referrals to medical specialists

- Currently, if a physiotherapist refers a patient to a specialist medical practitioner, the patient cannot receive a Medicare rebate and must pay in full for the service.

- Due to these out-of-pocket expenses for the patient, almost all physiotherapists choose to refer their patients to a GP, so the GP can write the specialist referral and the patient can receive a Medicare rebate.

- The Australian Physiotherapy Association acknowledges the role of the GP and support provision of regular information to the patient’s identified GP. However, this circular referral is unnecessary as physiotherapists have the required clinical reasoning skills, knowledge of anatomy and biomechanical understanding of injury and disease to determine when a specialist opinion is required to achieve best health outcomes for the patient.

- A change in current policy to allow direct referral and Medicare rebate by physiotherapists to medical specialists would have many benefits. Direct referral to relevant specialists would save treatment costs for the patient and avoid the double-handling of having to engage a GP in the treatment process simply to write a referral.

- Access to direct specialist treatment may also well provide for early recovery and better treatment outcomes overall.

- Individual physiotherapy practitioners recognise their professional limitations and know when and who a patient should be referred to.

The diversity, skills and knowledge of physiotherapists are not being fully utilised by current referral policy, which is costing governments, the Medicare system and patients more than needs be. The Medicare Benefits Schedule needs to recognise this and support access to timely treatment and the removal of unnecessary costs for patients of physiotherapists.