Sole Rural and Remote Physiotherapists

Sole practitioners working in rural and remote areas, in both the public and private sectors, are generalist physiotherapists whose clients are drawn from the whole-of-life age spectrum. Sole rural and remote physiotherapists therefore provide a wide range of clinical services which may include:

- Aquatic physiotherapy;
- Cardiothoracic physiotherapy;
- Ergonomics and occupational health physiotherapy;
- Geriatrics and gerontological physiotherapy;
- Musculoskeletal physiotherapy;
- Neurological physiotherapy;
- Paediatric physiotherapy;
- Sports-related physiotherapy; and
- Physiotherapy directed towards women’s and men’s health.

Service provision also extends beyond the parameters of clinical services into community participation, involvement with health education, and health promotion. Frequently, physiotherapists must travel substantial distances to provide outlying towns with services.

Public sector physiotherapists provide services in schools, hospitals, outpatient clinics, rehabilitation centres, community health services, aged/extended care facilities, industry and commercial settings, and in clients’ homes where their duties include the combined roles of primary clinician, educator, and patient advocate.

A sole rural and remote physiotherapist may also be responsible for the management of a hospital physiotherapy department. They therefore need to possess management skills (including budget management) which are adaptable to the particular policies and directions of both the health service unit and the health department. This responsibility often occurs within management structures which do not include the physiotherapist in decision making at the highest levels.

Sole rural and remote physiotherapists in private practice operate across a similarly broad spectrum, although many develop advanced clinical skills in specific areas to meet the particular needs of the community. Marketing is also a skill required within the private sector.

Whether in the public or the private sector, sole rural and remote practitioners will often be alone in the analysis, planning, submission, preparation, implementation, and evaluation of developments in physiotherapy services. Physiotherapists need the ability to understand and interpret community needs and, in the absence of formalised support and resource networks, the ability to work unsupervised and with initiative in meeting those needs. In addition to the responsibility for physiotherapy services, the sole rural and remote practitioner often needs to work as part of a multidisciplinary team or to develop multidisciplinary skills if there are no other allied health professionals in the area.
Sole rural and remote physiotherapists also need skills in networking in health care, working in a cross-cultural environment, service development and evaluation, computer literacy, information technology utilisation, rural health management, counseling, primary and public health care, applied research, and stress management. Due to the need to network outside their normal working environment, their communication and interpretative skills must also be well developed.

It is also recognised that working as a health professional and living in a remote community requires the increasingly important skill of defining the boundaries between professional and social life. A health professional holds a privileged position in remote communities and as a result, the sole physiotherapist will often be called upon to be involved in community activities unrelated to physiotherapy. Although these extra demands may provide wonderful opportunities for many physiotherapists, they can also add stress for some who are working in an isolated environment without formalised support structures.

All too often, as a result of recruitment difficulties, the sole therapist is an inexperienced physiotherapist who initially lacks the diversity of skills necessary to cope.

The APA recognises the nature and extent of the demands made on the sole rural and remote physiotherapy practitioner and the diversity of skills required. In order to meet the rural community’s expectations of equitable access to healthcare, and to enhance the image of rural physiotherapy, the APA maintains that:

- Physiotherapists in sole practitioner positions and practices in rural communities need to be competent, confident, and experienced across the spectrum of physiotherapy practice;
- Appropriate professional development must be available and accessible to sole rural and remote health practitioners to assist them in developing and maintaining the broad range of skills required;
- The experience and skills of sole rural and remote physiotherapists must be duly recognised with an appropriate public award system and rural incentives program;
- Mentoring, particularly of inexperienced therapists, is essential;
- Implementation of a specialisation process for rural and remote physiotherapists will assist with recognition that these practitioners have advanced level skills in this specific area.