

TITLE: Are New Graduate Physical Therapists Prepared to Manage Pelvic Dysfunction?

BACKGROUND: Physical therapists (PTs) treat a wide variety of health conditions, including pelvic dysfunction (PD). PD refers to dysfunction of the bony structure of the pelvis, the pelvic muscles, the nerves of the pelvis, or a combination of these. Common pathologies that often have a pelvic dysfunction component include urinary and fecal incontinence, chronic pelvic pain, pelvic organ prolapse, and painful intercourse. Research has shown that physical therapists are effective in treating and managing many of these pelvic dysfunctions. Therapeutic Interventions including exercise, patient education, and neuromodulation may be included in the management of pelvic dysfunction. Some treatments related to pelvic dysfunction may require specialized training. However, entry-level PTs are expected to have basic knowledge and skills to treat PD and recognize when a referral to a specialist is warranted.

PURPOSE: The study aimed to assess whether new graduates feel confidently prepared by their physical therapy educational curriculum to treat PD.

METHODS: A baseline of entry-level knowledge was established per the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) accreditation standards, the Guideline for Women's Health Content in Professional Physical Therapist Education provided by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) Academy of Pelvic Health, and the APTA minimum required skills of physical therapist graduates at entry level. Utilizing information from these standards and guidelines, a 9-item survey was constructed and distributed to 3rd year PT students and new graduate PTs to assess their baseline knowledge and skills related to pelvic dysfunction. Information was also gathered on the pelvic health curriculum of each respondent.

RESULTS: Responses were collected from 239 students and new graduate PTs and represented 18 states. On average, 37% of respondents felt somewhat confident or very confident in performing any of the entry-level skills provided by the standards and guidelines. 70% of respondents do not take a course dedicated to pelvic health. Additionally, in other courses, the topic is covered, on average, for 1-2 hours.

DISCUSSION: Certain skills are reserved for PTs who specialize in pelvic health. However, new graduates should be confident in performing entry-level skills including prescribing pelvic floor exercises, adjusting treatments for pregnant patients, screening for pelvic dysfunction, and recognizing when there is a need for referral.

CONCLUSION: Entry-level PTs do not feel confident or prepared to screen, provide interventions, or refer patients with PD. New approaches to pelvic health curriculum are warranted to ensure entry-level PTs are prepared with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide the best care for patients who are experiencing pelvic dysfunction.