

Who and what is Physical Therapy?

Advances in weaponry, which included the machine gun and heavy artillery, coupled with the archaic tactic of trench warfare led to massive casualties on the battlefields of Europe in WWI. Attending the wounded American soldiers were a new service corps of "Reconstruction Aids". So successful were these women at restoring the health functional status of their patients that their methods of treatment were documented and codified into what was to become the discipline of physical therapy.



The first professional association was formed in 1921. It was named the American Women's Physical Therapeutic Association. It contained 274 charter members. Within 20 years the association grew to nearly 1000 members and also to include men. At that point it changed its name to the American Physiotherapy Association.

Reconstruction Aides began assisting physicians in their work as early as the second decade of the 20th Century. A protracted poliomyelitis epidemic and two world wars spurred a demand for the young profession. By the 1940's the Association's membership topped 8,000 and educational programs sprung up around the country.

By the late 1940s, the Association had changed its name again to the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). The APTA now represents more than 66,000 members.

Broadly, physical therapy involves the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of "movement dysfunctions". The movement dysfunction category is so expansive that it catches a copious variety of conditions including those related to pediatric and geriatric populations, and orthopedic, neurologic, rheumatologic, and internal medical diseases and injuries. Because of this, physical therapists practice in a wide variety of settings. A partial list includes: comprehensive outpatient rehab facilities [CORF], home health agencies, hospitals, private practices, outpatient clinics, schools, sports and fitness facilities, work settings, rehabilitation agencies, and skilled nursing facilities [SNF].

PT's examine patients and develop treatment plans that employ techniques that promote mobility, pain reduction, functional restoration, and disability prevention. In addition, PT's work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility before it occurs by developing fitness- and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

All PT's must receive a graduate degree from an accredited physical therapist program before taking the national licensure examination that allows them to practice. The majority of programs now offer the doctor of physical therapy (DPT) degree. Currently, 199 colleges and universities nationwide offer professional physical therapist education programs.

State licensure is required in each state in which a physical therapist practices. After graduation, candidates must pass a state-administered national exam. Other requirements for physical therapy practice vary from state to state according to physical therapy practice acts or state regulations governing physical therapy.

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