

New Guidelines for Physiotherapy Provision in Aged Residential Care

Physiotherapy New Zealand (Older Adults Special Interest Group) have recently released the first Aotearoa New Zealand guidelines on the benefits and utilisation of physiotherapy services in aged residential care (ARC) (Physiotherapy New Zealand, 2022). The provision of physiotherapy services in ARC has long been unclear with the contractual requirements being “grey” at best. These guidelines aim to provide managers with information around the benefits of a robust and effective physiotherapy service, and the “how to” of selecting and planning for this. They are also a tool by which potential consumers of ARC services can select a provider, and a starting point to address the lack of specific funding for physiotherapy in this sector.

The vision of the Aotearoa New Zealand's Healthy Ageing Strategy (Ministry of Health, 2022) is that older people live well and age well. This commitment to wellbeing in older age should continue through the lifespan, including when a person moves into care. People admitted to ARC often present as deconditioned, frail, and with higher medical needs (Kojima, 2015). This is often linked with recent illness, deterioration, or an event that has triggered ARC admission. Utilising physiotherapy allows facilities to support their residents' physical functioning, enable their wellbeing, and rehabilitate them from injury and illness. Furthermore, physiotherapy assists the management of long-term conditions, slows the progression of long-term conditions, and delays the onset of frailty and disability.

There is robust evidence that exercise improves the ability to perform activities of daily living in ARC residents (Crocker et al., 2013). Recent international task force recommendations are that all ambulant ARC residents should have a personalised exercise programme as part of their health care plan (de Souto Barreto et al., 2016). The role of the physiotherapist is wider however than exercise programmes, with physiotherapists bringing strong assessment skills and management of a range of health conditions. Physiotherapists are also essential in determining resident safety when they are no longer independently mobile and require prescription of manual handling equipment in order to transfer and mobilise them.

The utilisation and perceived value of physiotherapy in ARC was brought to the forefront during the COVID lockdowns in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our physiotherapy colleagues across the country reported a huge range of responses from ARC facilities. Some saw physiotherapy as an “essential service” and therefore continued to allow their physiotherapists access to provide this service to their residents. Some denied access but battled on with telehealth, and many simply closed their doors and did not engage with physiotherapy for weeks and months. The staff were understandably working at levels of stress never before felt in the industry – but for those of us locked out it was a cold, harsh realisation that our value was simply not seen or appreciated. The question arose: how can we demonstrate to those who do not instinctively see what we do for residents, and how do we argue our case for access?

Those working as physiotherapists in ARC knew the damage that would occur when residents were not allowed to continue with rehabilitation, and in many cases were isolated in their rooms so even the most basic right to mobility and movement was denied. During lockdown people continued to have strokes, fracture their hips, and generally decline. Without physiotherapy input their outcomes can only have been worse.

Seeking solutions to this, a working group was formed from the Older Adults Special Interest Group (OASIG) of Physiotherapy New Zealand. The original goal was to find overseas guidelines, adapt them to an Aotearoa New Zealand environment, and start to ‘prove’ our effectiveness. As many people in our position will attest, this was never going to be as easy as that. With the benefits of a researcher and academic in our working group we turned to the literature and found more questions than answers. There was no clear model for how physiotherapy can be used effectively in ARC with a range of different funding models overseas and very little in the way of answers. Encouragingly, we did find that others were also asking questions. Brett et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of 11 studies, which identified the worldwide use of physiotherapy in aged care nursing homes and found inconclusive and inconsistent evidence for best practice guidelines. Given this, the only answer was to “write them ourselves”.

The guidelines took over a year to produce and were written based on the clinical experience of our working group – all senior physiotherapists heavily involved in provision of ARC services. The draft was circulated, and feedback and contributions were gratefully received from the industry and interested parties such as the University of Auckland, University of Otago, Age Concern New Zealand, the Office for Seniors (Ministry of Social Development), Ministry of Health, and ARC providers.

The guidelines include information on:

- the background and importance of physiotherapy
- when physiotherapy input is recommended – what should trigger a referral
- how much and how often
- safe, effective, and legal use of physiotherapy assistants
- facilitating access to privately funded physiotherapy for individual residents
- moving and handling training
- how to select a physiotherapist
- documentation
- service set up.

These guidelines have been needed for many years. A report to Physiotherapy New Zealand in 2010 stated “serious concerns for the decreasing number of physiotherapy hours in aged care

residential facilities” (Physiotherapy for the Older Adult Special Interest Group, 2011, p. 2). The report outlined inadequate provision of physiotherapy service. In 2022, physiotherapists see extreme variation in the provision of physiotherapy, from 20+ hours per week right down to hospital-level care facilities with no weekly physiotherapy provision.

These guidelines will not only inform managers but will also be an essential guideline allowing more informed consumers to ask appropriate questions when selecting their ARC facility. Generally, physiotherapy services are listed on Eldernet (2022) as “yes/no”. These guidelines will give consumers the understanding to ask detailed questions about hours of physiotherapy per week, what can be expected in terms of assessment and input for themselves or their whānau, and allow them to understand how the provision of a robust physiotherapy service can improve their experience of ARC living. Importantly, the publication of these guidelines has also been a starting point for conversation with funders of ARC. If we accept the guidelines and accept the importance of physiotherapy input for the wellbeing of our vulnerable older adults, then funding needs to follow.

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