

## Guiding Occupational Health Physiotherapy into the Future

### What is an occupational health physiotherapist?

Occupational health (OH) is an area of work that aims to promote and maintain the highest degree of physical, mental, and social wellbeing of workers in all occupations (International Labour Organization, 2003). An OH physiotherapist is a qualified physiotherapist with expertise in preventing and managing work-related injuries and illnesses. Occupational health physiotherapists work with individuals and organisations to identify and eliminate occupational hazards in the workplace, and also promote and maintain the health and wellbeing of workers. They can work independently or within interdisciplinary teams to meet the needs of workers and stakeholders (McAulay et al., 2023).

### What do OH physiotherapists do?

The responsibilities of OH physiotherapists positively impact work, workers, workplaces, tasks, and systems. The tasks undertaken by workers can expose them to various physical, psychological, and environmental demands, which can have either positive or negative effects on their health. Occupational health physiotherapists operate in diverse settings, utilising their extensive understanding of these factors to actively mitigate risks and enhance the overall wellbeing of workers. These initiatives can be categorised as both proactive and reactive in nature. They encompass activities such as designing systems, enhancing posture and movement for sedentary roles, offering equipment recommendations, and suggesting methods to reduce the load, frequency, or duration of manual tasks. Wellbeing initiatives aimed at fostering positive workplace health can vary based on specific workplace requirements and the expertise of the clinician. They may include initiatives involving cultural shifts within organisations, revamping work design, developing policies and procedures, and conducting training sessions.

In addition to their preventive efforts, OH physiotherapists play a crucial role in facilitating the return of injured workers to their jobs. They provide support and help manage the expectations of both workers and workplaces to improve confidence and return to work outcomes (Christopherson et al., 2022). Their services encompass personalised rehabilitation as well as the development and support of safe and sustainable return-to-work programmes. Occupational health physiotherapists collaborate closely with organisations to enhance the efficiency and safety of work task performance, ultimately benefitting workplace culture, productivity, efficiency, and profitability. Their role is characterised by a high degree of autonomy, offering flexibility and versatility in terms of work hours and environments.

### Where do OH physiotherapists work?

Occupational health physiotherapists operate across a diverse spectrum of work settings, ranging from physically demanding roles in industries such as forestry, manufacturing, health, agriculture, and construction to more sedentary or light roles

within corporate offices, laboratories, or automated production facilities. With a multifaceted role where the primary objective is the prevention of injuries and illnesses within the workplace, work can range from computer-based policy development to instructing workers on the shop floor.

Rather than confining themselves solely to clinical intervention after injuries occur, OH physiotherapists strive to be proactive. Consequently, OH physiotherapists extend their reach far beyond the confines of a clinic. Armed with a skill set that encompasses risk management, injury prevention, systems analysis, and fostering a positive workplace culture, they become integral assets to any organisation.

### How are OH physiotherapists unique?

There are many professions working in the field of OH, all with different and overlapping areas of expertise. As well as being able to undertake workplace assessments, deliver workplace health and safety training, provide consulting services, and oversee rehabilitation and return-to-work programmes, OH physiotherapists can provide diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, and work capacity certification.

OH physiotherapists have expertise in human movement analysis to understand the tasks and loads to which people are exposed and can use this knowledge to help reduce the risk of work-related injuries. An OH physiotherapist applies their understanding of specific workplace dynamics and the complex interaction between these factors.

### Why are guidelines required?

To date, OH physiotherapists working in Aotearoa New Zealand have lacked clarity and guidance around defining their unique skills, attributes, and potential career pathway. Therefore, to address this, a working group of seven OH physiotherapists has collaborated for over 18 months to create a practical guide for clinical, professional, and promotional purposes. The guidelines were disseminated at the Occupational Health Symposium (Harvey et al., 2023a) and recently published (Harvey et al., 2023b).

Feedback and consultation were sought from international and local industry experts, as well as the Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand and Tae Ora Tinana. These guidelines are designed to complement the Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand's physiotherapy thresholds document, which outlines the key roles and competencies for a physiotherapist practising in Aotearoa New Zealand (Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand, 2023). The International Federation of Physiotherapists working in Occupational Health and Ergonomics (IFPOHE), a subgroup of World Physiotherapy, was consulted to ensure this document has maximal credibility and consistency to support the profession's growth both nationally and internationally (International Federation of Physiotherapists working in Occupational Health and Ergonomics, 2023).

## OH physiotherapy in Aotearoa New Zealand: Practice guidelines highlights

The newly released guidelines outline the varying skills an OH physiotherapist can develop as they progress through their career within both core and complementary areas of practice. The guidelines describe different aspects of OH physiotherapy such as professional and ethical practice, communication, self-directed learning and reflection, collaboration, being an educator, and leadership and management skills. The guidelines outline how these skills may progress and develop over time and demonstrate what these skills look like in practice with case study examples. The guidelines also provide links to relevant legislation, standards, and acts, and outline essential knowledge and working relationships within OH physiotherapy. This enables easy access to key information, promoting high-quality practice for all OH physiotherapists. The goal is for the OH physiotherapy profession to thrive in Aotearoa New Zealand. We envisage these guidelines will help navigate OH physiotherapy into a bright future.

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