

10,000-FOOT VIEW: IS PHYSIOTHERAPY A PROFESSION OR A TRADE?

PHYSIOTHERAPY IS ONE OF the few primary healthcare professions to straddle both the private and public sectors. With equal representation in the two sectors, physiotherapists face unique and complex challenges when trying to grow their practices.

As physiotherapists adopt new promotional tools to reach patients, *Physiotherapy Practice* asks, What does this mean for the culture of the profession as a whole? Is advertising a necessary part of owning a business? Is there a risk of commercializing physiotherapy? Where's the line for our profession?

Duncan Sinclair, DVM, MSA, PhD, former dean of medicine at Queen's University and a current member of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's Board of Directors, feels strongly that the true definition of "a professional" encompasses more than ethics, morals and excellent patient care. "True professionals don't advertise," says Dr. Sinclair, who thinks it would be wiser for physiotherapists to conduct themselves more like providers of a public service. "Some lawyers have recently started advertising," he admits, "but the reputable ones don't." He also cites the types of advertising some cosmetic surgeons and laser eye surgeons use as having, in his view, "crossed the line."

But where is that line? It's a critical question for many physiotherapists in private practice.

Angus Driver, co-owner of Adelaide West Physiotherapy in downtown Toronto, prides himself on professionalism. "Ethics, morals and integrity are important," he says. "They're what drive me and what also drive our clinic's reputation."

When Driver and fellow physiotherapists Kate Gladney and Carl Gayle joined forces seven years ago to open the practice, their individual and well-established client bases followed them



to the sun-filled, loft-style space that the team occupies today. The combination of loyal clients and a per-visit payment system meant the business was profitable within its first month.

"My two partners and I are manual and manipulative therapists, and we only hire people with the same advanced qualifications," says Driver, referring to the three additional physiotherapists who complete the staff, along with two massage therapists, a nutritionist and a fitness trainer. "We take a team approach, and we consult with each other to give our patients the best care."

Their desire for the highest standard of care led the partners to make two additional important business decisions: to see only two clients per hour, and to share the clinic's business responsibilities equally among the three of them so they can each remain fully committed to patient care. "We don't rush people through to boost the bottom line," asserts Driver.

While Driver considers himself a professional, he is also comfortable defining himself as a small-business owner who provides valuable services. "I think we fit somewhere between professional and tradesperson," he says. "Our education and skill levels are high, but we do market ourselves. I'm not against print adver-

tisements, but they don't work for us because we have a very local target market."

Driver and his colleagues are selective about the clinic's message and medium in advertising. His clinic's best marketing tool is its website, he says; it generates up to 40 per cent of the clinic's business. He and his partners also present special-interest talks to athletes and at in-services, and he is just beginning to experiment with Facebook and Twitter for promotional purposes. The clinic also has good referral relationships with several family practitioners and sports medicine physicians who have great faith in the physiotherapists' abilities.

Carol Kennedy, a physiotherapist and partner at Treloar Physiotherapy in Vancouver, says advertising can have a valuable role in promoting the profession. She clearly sees herself as a professional and believes that advertising is good when it focuses on the practice. "I define a profession as a group that has distinct knowledge and skills, that is self-regulated and that assumes responsibility and liability for its actions," says Kennedy. "I think physiotherapists hold themselves to a very high professional standard."

While physiotherapists working in hospital settings don't need to advertise or promote



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themselves to patients, it’s different in private practice, she says. “Any time you’re self-employed, you need to somehow get people through your door. We can’t do anyone any good unless they know we are here.” This fact is especially true for newly established businesses.

Kennedy finds that some advertising can be informative and even educational. “Advertising is really an extension of accessibility. I think advertising that tastefully informs people about your hours of operation and the services available, rather than emphasizing selling, is very appropriate for physiotherapists.”

Tim Eichholz, executive director and registrar of the Saskatchewan College of Physical Therapists, highlights differentiation of the profession as another role for advertising, noting that “many people don’t know the difference between the skills of chiropractors, physiotherapists and massage therapists.”

In his province, there have been very few complaints about or investigations of members violating advertising bylaws. “The professional standards are very dear to them, and they are quick to raise the issue if they see anyone step over the line,” he says.

Dr. Sinclair notes the need for repeat customers as a small-business driver. “In any trade, small business is always working on getting customers coming back for additional services,” he says. However, he says, this concept is completely at odds with health care in general and specifically with the practice of physiotherapy. Clinics that aggressively recruit patients may be running counter to practice values.

According to Eichholz, the physiotherapist’s goal is to have patients successfully complete their treatment plans, not to encourage them to become repeat customers. “To solicit additional physiotherapy that’s not necessary or that isn’t to the benefit of the patient could be a violation of the code of conduct,” he says.

Driver agrees. He says that encouraging repeat business would be the downfall of his business. “We definitely want our patients to get better as quickly as possible and to have such a good experience that they tell other people about us,” he says. His clinic keeps individual and group statistics that track the success of their patients’ treatments in an effort to both measure and improve the clinic’s performance. “And when patients go back to their family practitioners and tell them how their injuries were treated efficiently, this leads to more referrals from these physicians,” he adds.

The approach at Kennedy’s clinic is similar. “The best advertising is word of mouth,” she says. “Our greatest success comes when patients reach their goals, we discharge them and they no longer need us.”

Dr. Sinclair urges clinicians in private practice to consider physiotherapy’s place in the

healthcare system when deciding how to conduct and market their businesses. He predicts that, in the future, healthcare in Canada will look far different than it does today. The warning signs are already evident, he says.

“Canada is experiencing great difficulty sustaining publicly funded healthcare,” says Dr. Sinclair, noting that many other countries are facing the same crisis. “The share of gross domestic product spent on healthcare in the 1950s was seven per cent, and today it’s 12 per cent. The rate of increase is quite startling.

“Physiotherapy is respected and fast developing, but coasting along and doing its own thing,” he continues. “It seems unaware of or indifferent to the near certainty that its future environment will be remarkably different than its current environment.”

In the future, Dr. Sinclair predicts that society will invest significantly in primary care. To best serve themselves and the needs of the healthcare system, he believes physiotherapists should look to partner with physicians, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists and others as core members of the primary healthcare team. He further notes that being a small-business owner carries a certain amount of risk. Practices that adapt to change and deliver high-quality care are more likely to survive the coming changes than those that “cross the line” and commercialize the profession. “The trades will be dependent on the marketplace,” he says. “When the market does well, so will they, but when the market does poorly, they will do poorly.”

Unfortunately, integrating into a primary healthcare team is no easy feat for a physiotherapist in Canada today. While these teams have begun to expand across the country within the past decade, and millions of dollars have been committed to support team-based care, the vast majority of these newly funded primary care models do not include a physiotherapist.

Dr. Sinclair suggests that physiotherapists – and all healthcare professionals – take three basic steps: become more informed about public policy as it relates to healthcare and your profession; determine the future role you want to play; and develop some well-debated strategies to achieve your goal. “I believe that physiotherapists should be lobbying and working hard to show how important their services are in the promotion and maintenance of health.” ■

TELL US YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE ISSUES

Where do you draw the line when marketing your practice?

How do you value your role as a primary care provider,
and does it influence how you run your business?

Write to editor@physiotherapy.ca.