

Physiotherapists working in the emergency department (ED) play an integral role in the assessment, diagnosis, triage and management of patients with musculoskeletal (MSK) injuries and frail elderly patients showing a decline in function. Physiotherapists assess and treat mobility issues, provide instruction on appropriate mobility aids and facilitate safe discharge planning from the ED.

Role of Physiotherapy in the Emergency Department

The primary responsibility of physiotherapists in the ED is the assessment of mobility and function. The target population is primarily the frail elderly, however many other patient populations require such services, including patients with MSK injuries. The purpose of the assessment is to determine the most effective treatment plan that allows the patient to be discharged home safely including: 1) discharge from the ED; 2) remain for observation, treatment, and re-assessment prior to discharge; 3) admission to the hospital; or 4) transfer to respite care, placement or home with additional support services.

Physiotherapists also have a role as frontline primary health care providers, in the ED, in the assessment and diagnosis, within scope, of patients with MSK injuries. Physiotherapy services provided in the ED decreases wait times to access healthcare services and ultimately time spent by patients in the ED.¹⁻⁴

Impact on Patient Experience

Physiotherapy in the ED provides patients with individualized treatment plans targeted to address their discharge concerns resulting in high patient satisfaction.

- Physiotherapy management of soft tissue injuries in the ED results in high levels of patient satisfaction.^{2,3}
- Physiotherapy assessment and management of patients presenting to the ED decreases length of stay (LOS) in the ED and wait times without any increase in adverse events.^{3,4}
- Physiotherapy management of MSK injuries in the ED reduces disability.⁵

Impact on Population Health

Physiotherapy in the ED improves patient outcomes and acts as a bridge to community services that improve mobility and overall physical functioning.

- Physiotherapy provided in the ED improves patient outcomes, such as pain control, and disability and facilitates and ensures safe discharge home.⁶
- Improvements in safety and function resulting from physiotherapy interventions in the ED allow patients to live in the community longer.¹
- Physiotherapy in the ED facilitates discharge planning and access to other services and provides community information and mobility aids to patients in a timely manner resulting in a more efficient system.⁷

Impact on Health Care Costs

Physiotherapy services in the ED for the management of MSK injuries results in clinically-equivalent outcomes, when compared to physicians, for equivalent or less cost.^{8,9}

- Physiotherapists provide high standard care in the ED at an affordable cost.⁸
- Access to physiotherapists in the ED results in early intervention and decreases future use of health care services.¹
- Comprehensive discharge planning, facilitating access to other health care services, and effective management of presenting condition, by the physiotherapist, reduces return rate to the ED.¹

Summary

Physiotherapy in the ED improves patient outcomes and reduces the rate of return visits to the ED. Patients also report high satisfaction with physiotherapy services in the ED secondary to the improvements in function. Inclusion of physiotherapy services in the ED facilitates referrals to other inpatient and outpatient programs improving both the efficiency and continuity of care. An improvement in the continuation of care supports a safe return home and return to the community.

Key References:

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The value of a health care service is more than its proven cost-effectiveness. Quality of life, access, and continuity of care and integration of services are equally important criteria when looking at the broader concept of value.