

ASK THE PRACTICE ADVISOR

Supervision of Support Workers

Question:

I would like clarification on my responsibilities for supervision of support workers.

Typically, I work directly with trained therapy assistants, and it is clear where the PT responsibility for supervision lies. Occasionally, I am consulted to provide PT services for a client in a rural facility where there are limited PT services available. The request is for an assessment and provision of a program that will be administered by inhouse untrained “rehab aids.” These staff are not within our staffing complement, which means we have limited, or no control over their qualifications or training.

Following my initial consultation, I have limited ability to supervise or direct the staff in providing this therapy care. In reading the SCPT Practice Guideline for Physiotherapy Support Workers, there is not a clear definition of who is included as a physiotherapy support worker, and I am uncertain who is responsible to supervise, and where that responsibility ends. Please provide me with guidance that supports my responsibilities as a licensed PT when supervising untrained support workers.

Practice Advisor Response

You are correct, in [A Practice Guideline 15 Physiotherapist Support Workers March 2019.pdf](#), the SCPT does not specifically define support workers. The wide variety of support workers relied on to assist PT clients makes defining them challenging.

In all circumstances the SCPT guideline for support workers requires there *to be clear identification of the therapy professional responsible for choosing, delegating to, and*

supervising the support worker. The PT must take responsibility for all care they delegate to other members of the health care team.

In the assignment of tasks to a support worker **24(1) A member is responsible for assessing the knowledge, training, experience, and ability of a support worker and shall only assign tasks to the support worker that the support worker has the knowledge, training, experience, and ability to perform.**

Formally trained PTAs are only allowed to work in roles under the supervision of a PT. They do not have an independent scope of practice and therefore must work in a role where there is a PT to supervise them- making the supervisors role more defined.

As the need for support does not always match the availability of formally trained individuals, the PT's responsibility lies in choosing not only the support worker but in choosing what, if any, tasks are appropriate to delegate to these individuals. The PT must use their professional judgement to determine which clients would benefit from support worker involvement and obtain informed consent from the client.

As you suggest, there certainly are more challenges in the delegation of tasks to a support worker who is not in your staff complement or one who has limited formal training in rehabilitation. In all circumstances, it is important to ensure support workers knowledge and skills are adequate, and supervision is appropriate. In the case where you expect significant changes in the client's condition, it would be expected there would be significant PT involvement and the support workers knowledge and abilities would meet the needs.

Supervision may be a combination of direct and indirect. Virtual care may be partially acceptable to meet the direct supervision requirements if the PT feels that it is an appropriate method for the individual client situation and that the support workers skills and experience would be appropriately evaluated using this technology.

Regardless of level of training, written instructions and formal documentation would be required to ensure there is no misunderstanding of your ongoing involvement and the role of the support worker. The support worker needs to agree that the program provided is not to be deviated from and direction will be provided by the PT should modifications to the program be required.

Typically, in situations when a client's needs become those of maintenance, the client would be discharged from active PT services. When discharging a client from your services there should be clear expectation that the client/caregiver/support worker should contact you if the client's condition changes and requires reassessment and further PT involvement.

Workplace policies and procedures around delegation to support workers would be advised and the employer, the support worker and the PT would be expected to know and work within the SCPT practice guidelines.

The Saskatchewan College of Physical Therapists (SCPT) summarizes their position on the use of support workers as follows-

The College supports the utilization of physiotherapist support workers where:

- 1. A physical therapist is employed.***
- 2. The physiotherapist support worker is adequately trained and is completely safe and competent in the performance of the tasks in the assigned areas.***
- 3. The physical therapist provides adequate supervision according to the competencies of the support worker, the severity and the complexity of the disorder, the complexity of the client, and the clinical setting in which the client is being seen.***
- 4. The supervising physical therapist is available by telephone, teleconference, or other forms of communication, or if unavailable, an alternate physical therapist supervisor is designated.***