



## **Spinal Manipulation in Physical Therapy Practice December 2011**

In order for any skill to be added to the scope of practice of a physical therapist, there must be a body of knowledge, skills and documented competency that are taught in basic, entry-level professional programs. There must be professional standards and position statements and the activity must be an acceptable standard of care that is backed by professional literature and research. The professional also must be responsible and accountable for the safe performance of the skill.

### **Knowledge, safety, skills and documented competency**

- Washington is one of two states that prohibit physical therapists from performing spinal manipulation by statute. The other state is Arkansas. Other states have qualifying criteria in their licensing act or administrative code that allows physical therapists to manipulate the spine.
- In 1999, the Washington State Department of Health conducted a sunrise review that concluded that physical therapists should be able to perform spinal manipulation. DOH recommended an endorsement process whereby education and competency are demonstrated.
- Physical therapists have a long history of safely providing manual therapy, including spinal manipulation techniques, without adverse affects.
- HPSO, the largest liability insurance carrier for physical therapists in the US, does not have higher claims for losses related to PT use of the thrust joint manipulation technique than any other PT treatment technique.
- Currently, physical therapists evaluate and treat patients without a referral. The law mandates that physical therapists recognize and take appropriate action when adverse clinical signs and symptoms are present and the patient must be referred to an appropriate health care provider for further evaluation.

### **Taught in basic entry-level professional programs**

- As of 2009, all three of the physical therapy schools in Washington (University of Puget Sound, University of Washington, and Eastern Washington University) must include spinal manipulation competency acquisition for students in order to remain accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Physical Therapy Education. All students of these programs graduate with a clinical Doctorate of Physical Therapy degree.

- According to surveys done in 2010 and 2011, a high percentage of Washington physical therapy (two of which are state funded) school graduates say they will leave our state because of the spinal manipulation prohibition and concern that they can't practice with evidence-based best standards of care. This exacerbates the current PT shortage in our state and is a waste of the taxpayer dollars spent on supporting their education. In addition, administrators and practice owners that hire physical therapists have reported that they sometimes have difficulty hiring candidates from other states because the prohibition on spinal manipulation would prevent them from providing best practice medical care.

### **Professional association standards and position statements**

- The American Physical Therapy Association has published standards and position statements stating spinal manipulation is part of physical therapy practice.
- The Veterans Hospital Association and the US Department of Health and Human Services (Medicare) acknowledge that spinal manipulation is part of physical therapy practice.

### **Practice is an acceptable standard of care**

- Washington law allows physical therapists to use manipulation techniques on all joints except joints located in the spine. It doesn't make sense to limit use of manipulation techniques only to certain parts of the body.
- Clinical practice guidelines describe the appropriate use of spinal manipulation including when not to perform the technique.
- Physical therapists could perform spinal manipulation techniques in Washington prior to the prohibition enacted in 1983. This prohibition was not based on safety concerns. What *has* changed since 1983 is the overwhelming research favoring spinal manipulation for specific conditions and its mandated inclusion in physical therapy education.

### **Professional literature and research**

- For over 70 years, physical therapists have been educated and trained to practice manual therapy, including spinal manipulation techniques. The literature supporting the use of manipulation by physical therapists dates back to 1925.
- Evidence shows that spinal manipulation for a select group of patients with sub-acute low back pain or neck pain is a beneficial and cost-effective treatment. These techniques expedite treatment progression toward exercise for long-term improvements and return to safe function, whether work or lifestyle related.