



Optimizing PT aids skills in an outpatient physical therapy setting

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Abstract: The successful outpatient physical therapy setting often has a high patient demand, dominated by stringent reimbursement rates driven by the insurance companies. Increasing competition between clinics, creating a challenging environment for clinics to survive with increased competition and sharing market share within the same geographic area. This article explores strategies for optimizing operational efficiency and maintaining high patient care driven strategic use of physical therapy aids while optimizing revenue stream. Selecting the ideal candidate profile, optimal training and clear understanding of job duties, patient care protocols, and operational strategies is important and critical. This article provides a comprehensive overview of effective use of PT aids. Additionally, it highlights essential precautions to ensure ethical and legal compliance, thereby fostering a sustainable and efficient healthcare setting with a patient centric approach.

Keywords physical therapy (PT), PT aids, physical therapy setting

Introduction

Outpatient physical therapy clinics are at the forefront of the orthopedic world of providing rehabilitative care, especially in states with direct access. This leads to often dealing with a high volume of patients with diverse needs. However, these clinics face significant challenges, including the pressures of high demand, limited reimbursements from insurance companies and fierce competition within the field. These factors make things difficult but also factoring in staffing challenges, labor rate increase leading to a need for innovative operational capabilities to optimize revenue.

One common approach to addressing these challenges is the employment of physical therapy aids. These aids support licensed therapists and therapist assistants by handling routine tasks, while allowing licensed professionals to focus on more complex therapeutic interventions, hands on therapy and creating access to new referrals. This strategy not only helps in reducing therapist and therapist assistant labor costs but also improves overall clinic efficiency and optimizes therapist use.

This article delves into the multifaceted role and untapped areas of opportunities of physical therapy aides in outpatient settings, examining their ideal candidate profile, training requirements, and specific job duties. It also provides insights into managing multiple patients at the same time, ensuring operational efficiency across multiple clinics as a manager or an owner, and adhering to essential precautions to maintain the integrity of care. By leveraging the capabilities of physical therapy aides, clinics can navigate the complexities of the outpatient setting more effectively and optimize their resources

Challenges And Strategies in The Outpatient Physical Therapy Setting

The outpatient physical therapy setting is renowned for its demanding environment. The dual pressures of high patient demand and insufficient reimbursements from insurance companies create a challenging situation for managers and owners of physical therapy clinics. Furthermore, increasing competition within the field exacerbates these challenges, forcing clinics to find cost-effective solutions without compromising the quality of care. The dynamics within these settings require innovative approaches to manage both operational costs and patient satisfaction effectively.



One such strategy involves hiring physical therapy aides instead of licensed therapists or therapist assistants to reduce labor costs. Although not an ideal scenario, this approach alleviates some pressure from the shoulders of therapists and therapist assistants, allowing them to focus on more complex tasks and patient care. This method has been adopted widely, with the aim of balancing the quality of patient care with the financial constraints faced by many outpatient clinics (Robinson & Stojan, 2018). This also ensures that at no point of the treatment session does the patient feel ignored by the healthcare providers and has constant feedback from a trained professional.

Ideal Candidate for Physical Therapy Aide Positions

The most suitable candidates for physical therapy aide positions are typically students currently enrolled in or graduating from exercise or health-related fields with aspirations of attending physical therapy or physical therapy assistant schools. These individuals often possess the desire, basic knowledge and a keen interest in physical therapy, which makes them quick learners and highly motivated employees. However, the role is versatile enough that candidates with a go-getter attitude and proper training aligned with the clinic's culture can also thrive. According to a study by Taylor and Keating (2019), enthusiasm and the willingness to learn are critical attributes that can transform any candidate into an ideal physical therapy aide.

Job Duties and Training

New physical therapy aides often find the task of simultaneously managing exercises for multiple patients to be the most challenging. Initial training with a seasoned employee can mitigate the stress and difficulties associated with learning exercises and patient interaction. This hands-on training is essential for building confidence and competence in new PT aides. Administrative tasks can sometimes be challenging, but are usually managed with minimal effort once the aides are familiar with the processes within a few weeks.

Key administrative tasks that require focused attention include:

- 1. Checking fax boxes every two hours** for new referrals and scheduling them promptly.
- 2. Verifying patient authorizations** every morning.
- 3. Calling and rescheduling patients** within ten minutes of their scheduled time if necessary.
- 4. Confirming appointments** for scheduled evaluations the day before.

These tasks, although are routinely performed, are vital for maintaining smooth clinic operations and ensuring patient satisfaction. Effective management of these duties can significantly reduce administrative stress and burden and enhance overall clinic efficiency (Smith et al., 2020).

Patient Care and Therapist Efficiency

Training physical therapy aides in patient care is essential. Therapists should assign exercises to aides once patients demonstrate proper mechanics. This allows therapists to focus on manual therapy and attend to multiple patients simultaneously. However, progression in exercises, especially those involving resistance, should be closely monitored by the therapist to ensure correct body mechanics, appropriate exercise dosage and patient safety. If a patient experiences pain or discomfort during exercises, the aide must stop the treatment immediately and inform the therapist for further assessment. This collaborative approach ensures that patient care remains consistent and of high quality (Johnson & Fisher, 2017).

Handling Multiple Patients

Clinics with more than one therapist but less than three therapists often require only one physical therapy aid, with an ideal ratio of 15 visits per day per aide. Handling multiple patients can be daunting initially, but with practice, it becomes more manageable. Some strategies to ease this process include:

- 1. Using a laptop** to monitor and document completed exercises for accurate documentation.
- 2. Avoiding over supervision:** It is important to monitor patients but staring at a patient for an exercise where they have shown good mechanical understanding and safety is unnecessary and unproductive.
e.g. Patient has performed leg press of last two sessions and starts to perform it once more for this session. Unless the patient wants to progress or has questions, they should be able to finish it independently.
- 3. Having a plan** for busier hours and communicating it with therapists on.



4. Remaining present in the exercise area rather than sitting near the office.

These strategies help PT aids manage their time efficiently and ensure that all patients receive adequate attention and care. Consistent practice and adherence to these methods can significantly improve the overall workflow within the clinic (Miller & Cole, 2018).

Operational Efficiency in Multiple Clinics

Managing multiple busy clinics requires operational efficiency to optimize every referral and improve clinic functioning. Physical therapy aides can play a crucial role in this by:

1. **Utilizing a common fax number** and diverting phones to one clinic where one person handles all faxes and phone calls, including new referrals, doctor's office communication, and patient calls.
2. **Diverting specific calls** to the required clinic while managing simpler tasks such as cancellations, scheduling, and rescheduling appointments by one person monitoring the faxes and phones.

This centralized phone and faxes approach ensures uninterrupted patient care during treatment sessions and efficient communication and scheduling. The role of the physical therapy aide in managing these operational tasks cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts the clinic's ability to handle high patient volume busy hours effectively (Thompson & White, 2019).

Common Exercises That a PT Aid

These exercises are only meant to be used as guidelines and for training purposes only. The following therapist listed precautions and contraindications are important.

Body Part	Exercise
Cervical/Neck/ Shoulder//Upper thoracic region	Trapezius/scalene, SCM, Pectoral stretch, High and low rows, thoracic extension, Latissimus dorsi stretch, shoulder scaption, abduction, adduction, extension. Threading the needle, Banded scapular retraction and depression
Lower back/Hip region	Hamstrings, calf, piriformis, gluteal stretches, Knee to chest stretch, hip flexors/quadriceps stretch, leg press, pelvic tilts, static hip abduction, static hip adduction, Monster walks, side stepping banded walks, core exercises, knee fallouts, bridges, resisted hip abductors, IT band and piriformis rollouts.
Knee and ankle	Most exercises from the hip and lower back are included. Other exercises include. Knee extensions, TKEs, stool scoots, eccentric hamstrings lowering, 4-way ankle strengthening, Plantar fascia roll outs, Towel scrunches, Toe ups, calf raises, Ball squeeze with calf raises, single leg Bosu balance, star excursions, banded or resisted walk outs.

Precautions

While employing physical therapy aides is beneficial, certain precautions must be taken to maintain the integrity of care and quality of patient care

1. **Avoiding fraudulent billing** by ensuring 1:1 billing time with insurances or federal payors which might require them
2. **Monitoring patient progress** to ensure adequate advancement.
3. **Prohibiting aides from performing manual therapy.**
4. **Training aides in therapeutic modalities** to minimize the risk of burns and shock to patients.

These precautions are necessary to ensure that the quality of care provided to the patients is not compromised and that the clinic operates within legal and ethical boundaries. By adhering to these guidelines, clinics can maximize the benefits of using physical therapy aides while maintaining high standards of patient care (Davies et al., 2020).

Conclusion



The outpatient physical therapy setting, despite its challenges, can thrive through strategic hiring, thorough training, and efficient operational practices. By leveraging the skills of physical therapy aides, clinics can deliver quality care while managing costs and improving overall efficiency. This multifaceted approach ensures that both patients and staff benefit, ultimately leading to a more effective and sustainable healthcare environment. This would also help reduce the stress level within the therapist, reducing attrition rate. Last but not most importantly, following patient safety, guidelines set by the insurance, states practice act laws and federal laws is extremely important.

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