



Canadian  
Physiotherapy  
Association

Association  
canadienne de  
physiothérapie



A WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH BY  
THE CANADIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION GLOBAL HEALTH DIVISION (October 13, 2023)

**National Office / Siège Social**  
955 rue Green Valley Crescent, Suite 270  
Ottawa ON K2C 3V4

**T** 613.564.5454 | **F** 613.564.1577  
[physiotherapy.ca](http://physiotherapy.ca) | [physiotherapiecanadienne.ca](http://physiotherapiecanadienne.ca)  
[information@physiotherapy.ca](mailto:information@physiotherapy.ca)



## Role of Physiotherapy Expertise & Pandemic Prevention and Preparedness

This submission is provided to the Standing Committee on Health regarding *Bill C-293 (an Act respecting pandemic prevention and preparedness)* by the Global Health Division of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA). Physiotherapy professionals offer a critical perspective which needs to be considered for pandemic prevention and preparedness.

Physiotherapists are movement experts and leaders in ageing, injuries, diseases, and the identification of harmful lifestyle trends and environmental factors. Our education and practical experience are essential for relieving pain and enabling mobility without the use of drugs or surgeries, and helping to alleviate the growing pressures experienced in general practice and primary care<sup>1</sup>.

Physiotherapy professionals have multi-dimensional expertise that makes them invaluable in pandemic planning as they can help support with:

### **1. Infection Control**

Physiotherapists are educated and trained in infection prevention and control measures. As a result, they can provide guidance on many aspects of infection prevention and control, such as the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and disinfection protocols, which help to minimize the risk of spreading infectious diseases.

### **2. Risk Assessment**

Physiotherapists are highly skilled in assessing risk in multiple settings, including clinics, community settings, and hospitals, and can help recommend strategies to reduce risks in these settings.

### **3. Patient Management**

Physiotherapists are trained and skilled in patient evaluation, assessment, and management, and can support individualized treatment plans.

### **4. Triage Care**

Physiotherapists have exceptional qualifications in medical screening, making them vital to the triage process with the rapid identification of “medical red flags” for the prioritization of patient care.

### **5. Virtual and Telehealth**

Physiotherapists help to support patients in a variety of settings, including virtual and or telehealth. This distinct skill set can be helpful for those who live in remote areas where care may not be readily available. During the COVID-19 pandemic, physiotherapists utilized virtual and telehealth platforms to support the ongoing care of patients.

### **6. Rehabilitation**

Following a pandemic, having the expertise of physiotherapists to support the recovery and rehabilitation of patients recovering from illnesses is instrumental as they can support treatment programs to assist with the varied needs of someone affected by a pandemic.

### **7. Education and Communication**

Physiotherapists are experts in patient education and communication and work to support their patients and other healthcare professionals about critical needs during a pandemic.

## **8. Inter-professional Leadership and Collaboration**

Physiotherapists work collaboratively and often in interdisciplinary teams with other health officials and regulated health care providers. They can use these skills to support pandemic response plans, protocols, and guidelines during a pandemic.

## **9. Physical Fitness**

It is well-established that low immunological response and low physical fitness are risk factors during a pandemic. Physiotherapists work to improve the physical fitness of their patients, thereby contributing to improved immunological response and the reduction of these health risk factors.

## **10. Public Health:**

Physiotherapists play an important role in public health through the coordination of community resources and by advocating for rehabilitation services<sup>2</sup>. Leveraging the skills and expertise of physiotherapy professionals in pandemic planning can enable them to contribute in many ways to the overall health and well-being of Canadians during challenging times.

Physiotherapists have the capacity to support a much broader range of healthcare solutions and patients - helping to alleviate the heavy burden on physicians and nurses. This is yet to be fully implemented in all provinces. One key issue that led to restrictions during the pandemic was the threat of overloading an under-resourced healthcare system. Physiotherapists can actively engage in the triaging of patients and offer education on activity levels, health precautions, respiratory exercises, and pain management, for example, effectively decreasing the burden on the healthcare system. This a paramount lesson to consider from this pandemic.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1: Include physiotherapy professionals as part of the composition of the advisory committee.**

Under C-293, the Minister of Health will need to strike an advisory committee to review the response to the pandemic and make recommendations. Given that the function of the committee is to make recommendations for a pandemic response, physiotherapists can support and play an integral role in enhancing prevention, preparedness, and response strategies for future pandemics.

Physiotherapist participation on the advisory committee will enhance the Pandemic Prevention and Preparedness Plan through the profession's expertise and leadership experience in mitigating pandemic risk by promoting healthy lifestyles and physical activity for all ages and across the lifespan.

Physiotherapists bring valuable knowledge that helps mitigate key drivers of pandemic risk factors by promoting healthy aging and reducing the reliance on institutional living arrangements. They also bring research knowledge and support public health and primary care capacity building in all areas of Canada, including urban, rural, isolated, and Indigenous communities. Canadian physiotherapists are also well-established in rehabilitation research globally.

## 2: Collect and analyze the health, personal, economic, and social factors relevant to the impact of the pandemic in Canada.

Using data to drive decision-making is crucial as Canada moves forward following the pandemic. During the pandemic, little data was available to illustrate how the mitigation efforts of the government were impacting the spread and severity of the disease. If Canada collected more disaggregated data during critical health responses such as a pandemic, it would facilitate improved decision-making<sup>3</sup>.

What data was collected was instructive. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, from a physiotherapy perspective, nearly 50% of children with developmental disabilities did not receive physical health services, leading to short and long-term health and social consequences. Furthermore, the lack of services was also distributed unequally, with single-parent families, lower socioeconomic status, and older children receiving less in-clinic and telehealth care<sup>4</sup>. Strengthening physiotherapy-related services in preparation and response to future pandemics is critical for mitigating disability-related inequalities.

Physiotherapists are aware of the importance of a world-class health data system as part of their negotiations between the federal government and the provinces and territories. This work is strongly encouraged for the benefit of all Canadians.

## 3: Include access to medical interventions, recreation, and in-home therapy under the key drivers of pandemic risk in section 4 (2) (b).

Strong evidence suggests that increased physical activity levels are a risk mitigator for pandemic severity and hospitalization<sup>5 6</sup>. For example, individuals with chronic comorbidities (hypertension, diabetes, respiratory conditions) had poorer health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exercise and increased physical activity are linked to reduced inflammatory responses, improve immune responses, and decreased severity of viral infections throughout life<sup>7 8 9</sup>. Physiotherapists have exceptional experience and training in this regard and every day see patients recover faster and with better results, due to timely medical intervention and physical activity.

## ABOUT THE CANADIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION GLOBAL HEALTH DIVISION

The CPA represents physiotherapy professionals, including registered physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants, physiotherapy technologists, and students across Canada. Physiotherapy professionals provide essential rehabilitative care, treatment, health promotion, and education, enabling Canadians to live well and actively participate in all facets of their lives.

The Global Health Division (GHD) of the CPA is comprised of physiotherapists who advocate for sustainable collaboration and elevate the mobility status of people worldwide. The mission of the Global Health Division (GHD) of the CPA is to position Canadian physiotherapists within a network that promotes just practice and a global health mindset, with an aim to address health inequities locally, nationally, and internationally.

<https://physiotherapy.ca/divisions/global-health/>

<https://physiotherapy.ca/>

## GLOBAL HEALTH DIVISION MEMBERS

Amanda L. Ager, PT, PhD candidate

Shaun Cleaver, PT, PhD

Hilary Crowley, PT

Derek Lai, PT, MPH in Global Health

Timothy O'Fallon, BSc(PT), MHSc

Phil Sheppard, PT, DrPH candidate

Mathieu Simard, PT

Mona Walls, PT

---

<sup>1</sup> Goodwin et al. (2020). Anxiety, perceived control and pandemic behaviour in Thailand during COVID-19: Results from a national survey. In *J Psychiatry Res.* 2021 Mar; 135: 212-217. doi: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.01.025. Epub 2021 Jan 21

<sup>2</sup> Sebeliski et al. (2021). The Need for a Leadership Competency Framework for Physical Therapists: A Perspective in Action. In *Journal of Physical Therapy Education*, 35 (1); p. 46-54, March 2021. Retrieved online: [The Need for a Leadership Competency Framework for Physical... : Journal of Physical Therapy Education \(lww.com\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Wolfson, M. (April 14, 2020). "During the pandemic, why has Canada's data collection lagged so far behind?". In the *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved online: [Opinion: During the pandemic, why has Canada's data collection lagged so far behind? - The Globe and Mail](#)

<sup>4</sup> González et al. (2022). Psychological symptoms of the outbreak of the COVID-19 confinement in Spain. In *Journal of Health Psychology*, Volume 27, Issue 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910532096708>

<sup>5</sup> Arena et al. (2022). Mortality and Admission to Intensive Care Unit of COVID-19 Patients. In *J. Clin. Med*, 2022, 11(8), 2235. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm11082235>

<sup>6</sup> Pronk, N, Faghy, M. (2022). Causal systems mapping to promote healthy living for pandemic preparedness: a call to action for global public health. In *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 19, Article number 13. [Causal systems mapping to promote healthy living for pandemic preparedness: a call to action for global public health | International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity \(springer.com\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Arena et al. (2022). Mortality and Admission to Intensive Care Unit of COVID-19 Patients. In *J. Clin. Med*, 2022, 11(8), 2235. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm11082235>

<sup>8</sup> Pronk, N, Faghy, M. (2022). Causal systems mapping to promote healthy living for pandemic preparedness: a call to action for global public health. In *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 19, Article number 13. [Causal systems mapping to promote healthy living for pandemic preparedness: a call to action for global public health | International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity \(springer.com\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> Filgueira, T et al. (2021). The Relevance of a Physical Active Lifestyle and Physical Fitness on Immune Defense: Mitigating Disease Burden, With Focus on COVID-19 Consequences. In *Frontiers of Immunology*, 05 February 2021. [Frontiers | The Relevance of a Physical Active Lifestyle and Physical Fitness on Immune Defense: Mitigating Disease Burden, With Focus on COVID-19 Consequences \(frontiersin.org\)](#)