

THE CONNECT FOR HEALTH ACT (H.R. 4932/S. 2741)

POSITION

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) supports the Creating Opportunities Now for Necessary and Effective Care Technologies (CONNECT) for Health Act of 2019 (H.R. 4932/S. 2741), legislation that would expand the use of telehealth services and ease restrictions on telehealth coverage under the Medicare program. S. 2741 was introduced by Sens Brian Schatz (D-HI), John Thune (R-SD), Roger Wicker (R-MS), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Mark Warner (D-VA), and Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS). H.R. 4932 was introduced by Reps Mike Thompson (D-CA), Peter Welch (D-VT), David Schweikert (R-AZ), Bill Johnson (R-OH), and Doris Matsui (D-CA).

BACKGROUND

Telehealth services are gaining a tremendous amount of attention at both state and federal levels as more providers, payers, and patients are seeking cost-effective and quality approaches to care. However, there are many barriers that prohibit provision of and reimbursement for services via telehealth. Currently, physical therapists (PTs) are not able to bill for telehealth services under the Medicare program. In fact, only a few provider groups are eligible under Medicare to furnish telehealth services to patients: physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurse-midwives, clinical nurse specialists, clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, and registered dietitians or nutrition professionals.

The CONNECT for Health Act would, under certain parameters, lift some of the current restrictions on telehealth services under the Medicare program, including who can provide telehealth and where these services can take place. Specifically, the bill would implement a Medicare waiver program that could allow PTs among other providers to apply for a waiver and be approved to furnish telehealth services when treating patients who are enrolled under the Medicare program, so long as those services meet certain criteria, such as they don't limit or deny coverage and can reduce spending without sacrificing quality of care.

In addition, the legislation would encourage the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) to identify services that could deliver both outcome- and cost-effectiveness through telehealth. Physical therapy is among the services that would be eligible to be reviewed by CMMI, which could design and test delivery models for possible adoption by Medicare, Medicaid, or the Children's Health Insurance Program.

APTA believes that this legislation would be a good first step toward allowing PTs to deliver services via telehealth. The bill would provide flexibility to both providers and patients, and it would do much to increase patient access to care, especially for those living in rural and underserved areas and for individuals with impaired mobility.

HOW WOULD PTs USE TELEHEALTH?

Telehealth may be used to overcome barriers of access to services caused by distance, unavailability of specialists and/or subspecialists, and impaired mobility. Examples of PTs using telehealth technologies include the following:

- PTs provide interventions using telehealth by observing how the patient moves and performs exercises and activities. They provide verbal and visual instructions and cues to modify how the patient performs various activities, and may change the environment to encourage optimal outcomes.
- PTs provide consultative services by working with other PTs, physical therapist assistants, and other health care providers to share expertise in specific movement-related activities to optimize the patient's participation.
- PTs provide quicker screening, assessment, and referrals that improve care coordination and increase the probability of patients completing plans of care.

Telehealth already is being used to treat patients with a variety of chronic conditions such as renal disease, diabetes, mental health, and substance use disorders, and holds promise for a broad range of patient populations, including those enrolled in Medicare. Emerging evidence indicates that telehealth can empower both patients and health care providers to offer the best approaches to care that consider patient demographics, location, and diagnoses; provide high-quality, cost-effective care¹; and reduce disparities in care, especially in rural communities.¹ While it does not eliminate the need for in-person visits, telehealth does increase access to a greater variety of providers and can enhance delivery and coordination of care.²

1. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. <https://www.cms.gov/About-CMS/Agency-Information/OMH/Downloads/Information-on-Medicare-Telehealth-Report.pdf>

2. Scholten J, et al. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmr.2018.08.003>

FACTS ABOUT PHYSICAL THERAPISTS AND PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANTS



WHO WE ARE

Physical therapists (PTs) are health care professionals who diagnose and treat individuals of all ages, from newborns to the very old, who have medical problems or other health related conditions that limit their ability to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. PTs also work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility before it occurs by developing fitness- and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

Physical therapist assistants (PTAs) provide selective physical therapist interventions under the direction and supervision of physical therapists.

WHAT WE DO

PTs examine each individual and develop a plan of care using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. Under the direction and supervision of the PT, PTAs provide selective physical therapist interventions based on the developed plan of care.

WHERE WE PRACTICE

PTs and PTAs provide care for people in a variety of settings, including outpatient clinics or offices; inpatient rehabilitation facilities; skilled nursing, extended care, or subacute facilities; education or research centers; schools; hospices; industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments; and fitness centers and sports training facilities.

EDUCATION AND LICENSURE

All PTs must receive a degree from an accredited physical therapist program before taking and passing a national licensure exam that permits them to practice. Since 2015, all accredited programs award the doctor of physical therapy degree. State licensure is required in each state in which a PT practices. PTAs must complete a 2-year associate's degree and are licensed, certified, or registered in most states.

AMERICAN PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION

The American Physical Therapy Association is a national organization representing more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students nationwide. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapist education, practice, and research.

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Cosponsor H.R. 4932/S. 2741 Today!

For additional information, contact the American Physical Therapy Association's Government Affairs Department at 703/706-8533 or advocacy@apta.org.