

Australia's COVID Group Exercise Package for Residential Aged Care

Submitted by Rik Dawson



The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) recognises that a major challenge facing modern health systems is how to ensure that quality services are available to older people who are living in the community and residential aged care facilities (RACF). We recognise that with ageing populations, demand for services will increase, and it is important that aged care environments which reward safe, high quality, affordable care, including physiotherapy is supported to ensure consumer needs are met.

The current funding system in Australia for Aged Care is flawed. It incentivises increased disability by providing increased funding for residents who deteriorate functionally; it provides funding for outdated passive physiotherapy treatment of chronic pain such as massage; and it does not provide any funding for preventative or restorative physiotherapy.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has provided the APA a platform to directly influence the reform agenda within Australia. The APA made several submissions to the Royal Commission advocating for specific funding for restorative and preventative physiotherapy. In October 2020, the counsel assisting the Royal Commission made over 100 recommendations many related to physiotherapy. The Government responded with the release of the allied health group therapy program.

The program is a temporary measure aimed at improving physical functioning of RACF residents who are at risk of deconditioning due to COVID-19 lock downs in 2020/21. The group therapy program that allied health professionals are required to deliver, is based on the SUNBEAM program, which has been proven to be effective in preventing falls in older people and was led by physiotherapist Dr. Jennifer Hewitt.

Funding will be provided for:

- one face-to-face initial consultation per professional group for each participant.
- two hours of face-to-face group therapy per week per participant, over a minimum of two sessions
- progressive strength and balance exercises.
- 50 hours over 6 months based on systematic reviews of exercise dosage for older people.

Requirements for the group therapy:

- Group therapy to be led by a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, or exercise physiologist. Allied health assistants, or student and/or RACF staff may also assist with program delivery.
- Group size is a maximum of 4 participants.
- The allied health provider must have an initial one-on-one consultation with each potential participant to determine baseline abilities. If a participant is suitable for group therapy, the provider will develop an individualised therapy plan and take baseline measures.
- The program will commence in March 2021 and evaluated upon completion in late 2021.

The APA believes that physiotherapists are well placed to lead this program and promote restorative physiotherapy in aged care. The challenge the physiotherapy profession faces now is how to incorporate this short-term advocacy win into ongoing funding within Australia. It is expected that more announcements regarding reform to the Australian Aged Care system will be announced by the Federal Government after the release of the Royal Commission's final report 26 February 2021.