

Primary Care Physicians May Benefit from Using a Physical Therapist as a Consultant in the Treatment of Musculoskeletal Injuries

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The primary care physician, PCP, is charged with the responsibility of knowing all of the body's systems, including the vast array of musculoskeletal problems. Specific diagnostic tests are used to aide in the diagnosis and the development of a patient's plan of care with musculoskeletal problems. Referring a patient to an orthopedic physical therapist should be a primary consideration for the development of the plan of care for the patient with a musculoskeletal complaint.

A PCP and a physical therapist can develop a relationship that utilizes the evaluation skills of the physical therapist to streamline the path toward recovery for the patient. A recent study reported in the Physical Therapy journal (Vol 83. number 10; October, 2003) supports just such a relationship.

The article contends PCPs using a physical therapist for musculoskeletal evaluations reported, "...a one time consultation is an appropriate and beneficial component of PCPs' patient management process." In this study, 342 patients presenting musculoskeletal complaints were referred for a one-time consultation to an orthopedic physical therapist. Based upon the therapist's evaluation and recommendation, the PCP's altered the course of 49% of treatments after the therapist's consultation. Ninety-Four percent of the PCPs reported that the consultation had answered their questions either "substantially" (102/342) or "excellently" (219/342). Physical therapy, as a course of treatment, was found to be not necessary in nearly one third of consultations.

A PCP may question if a patient is an appropriate candidate for physical therapy treatment. In general, any non-emergency surgical patient with a musculoskeletal disorder would be an appropriate candidate for a physical therapy consultation. After the one time consultation the therapist should make recommendations to the PCP if the patient is a candidate for therapy or would be better served by other medical means. This can be especially helpful with the treatment and management of workman's compensation injuries, and chronic or re-occurring conditions such as back or neck pain.

Utilizing a physical therapist as a consultant in treatment planning provides the PCP with additional medical options for the patient and can expedite the recovery process. If a physician has patients with acute, chronic or re-occurring symptoms that are limiting his or her ability to perform their work, activities of daily living or recreational activities; consider a referral to a licensed physical therapist for a consultation or treatment. A therapist will evaluate and use therapy skills to facilitate full recovery to the patient's previous level of functioning, give the patient the necessary tools to maintain a healthy state, and prevent further re-injury.