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Physical Therapy, Maintenance Therapy, and Wellness Services Guidance

Purpose: This guidance clarifies the definitions and requirements for Physical Therapy, Maintenance Therapy, and Wellness Services as outlined in the Louisiana Physical Therapy Practice Act (La. R.S. 37:2401–2425) and the Louisiana Physical Therapy Board Rules (LAC 46:LIV.103–501).

Definition of Physical Therapy Services

Louisiana law defines the practice of physical therapy as a health care profession in which a licensed physical therapist engages in the evaluation and treatment of individuals with physical or medical conditions to restore normal function of the neuromuscular and skeletal system, to relieve pain, or to prevent disability. This definition encompasses a broad scope of therapeutic interventions, including: therapeutic exercises, mobilization techniques, passive manipulations, therapeutic modalities, and other activities or devices for preventative, therapeutic, or medical purposes. In addition, the practice of physical therapy includes performing physical therapy evaluations, developing treatment plans, providing patient instruction and consultation, and supervising supportive personnel (such as PTAs) in the delivery of care.

Maintenance Therapy

Maintenance therapy refers to physical therapy interventions aimed at maintaining a patient's current functional status or preventing further decline, rather than achieving significant new improvements. Although the term maintenance therapy is not explicitly defined in the Practice Act, it is inherently included in the legal scope of physical therapy practice. The statutory definition of physical therapy encompasses not only restoring function and relieving pain, but also preventing disability. This means that providing skilled therapy services to prevent deterioration of function or to sustain the gains achieved (especially in cases of chronic or progressive conditions) falls well within a physical therapist's practice. In other words, even if a patient's condition has stabilized, a PT can continue to render services if those services are necessary to maintain the patient's condition or to prevent or slow future declines – this is considered part of the therapist's role in preventing disability.

When a physical therapist provides maintenance therapy, all standard rules for patient care still apply. The patient remains under a plan of care developed by the PT, and the PT must continue to assess and document the patient's status regularly. Louisiana Board Rules require that a PT perform periodic reassessments or reevaluations, including an update of objectives and goals, at

least once every 30 days (or at every visit if seen less frequently). These reassessments should compare the patient's current status to prior evaluations and revise the plan of care as needed. Even in a maintenance scenario, the PT should document the patient's response to interventions – for instance, noting if the patient's functional level is being preserved or if there is a decline in the absence of therapy. Progress notes must still be completed on at least a weekly basis (or each visit, if visits are less frequent) to record the patient's subjective status and any changes in objective findings. A discharge summary is eventually required when therapy services are terminated, summarizing the patient's status and the reasons for discontinuing care.

Maintenance therapy should be medically justified and beneficial to the patient. Louisiana's rules on professional conduct prohibit PTs from providing treatment interventions that are not warranted by the patient's condition or continuing treatment beyond the point of reasonable benefit to the patient. This means that a physical therapist should not continue treating a patient indefinitely without clear rationale – there must be a legitimate need for continued skilled intervention, such as documented risk of decline without therapy or the need for ongoing skilled techniques to maintain function. If a patient has plateaued and can carry out a maintenance program independently (or with unskilled assistance), or if therapy is no longer contributing to the patient's well-being, the ethical course is to discharge the patient from skilled physical therapy services. Conversely, if skilled maintenance therapy is indicated (for example, a patient with a neurodegenerative condition who requires continuous skilled cues and exercises to preserve mobility), the PT should clearly document the need for ongoing treatment and the care provided, in line with the documentation standards noted above.

Maintenance therapy is allowed and recognized as part of physical therapy practice in Louisiana, provided that it is performed by a licensed PT (or supervised PTA) with a proper plan of care, and it meets the standard of being necessary for the patient's condition. All licensing, documentation, and reassessment requirements that apply to restorative therapy equally apply to maintenance therapy. The PT should continually evaluate whether the patient is still benefiting in terms of preventing decline or maintaining function; when that is no longer the case, therapy should be concluded in compliance with professional standards.

Wellness Services

Wellness services (also referred to as preventive services in the Board Rules) are professional services provided by PTs that focus on health promotion, fitness, and injury prevention rather than treatment of a diagnosed injury or illness. The Louisiana Physical Therapy Board Rules define "Preventive Services" as the use of PT knowledge and skills to provide education or activities in a wellness setting for the purpose of injury prevention, reduction of stress and/or the promotion of fitness and for conditioning. Importantly, when a physical therapist or PTA is delivering services under this definition, they are not administering physical therapy treatment for a medical condition. In practice, these are services for a client (as opposed to a patient) who is seeking to improve or maintain general health, fitness, or well-being. The Board's rules explicitly distinguish a client as an individual who is the recipient of advice, education, or wellness-related services (like conditioning or fitness programs) not tied to a plan of care for a medical condition. By contrast, a patient is someone receiving physical therapy treatment pursuant to a diagnosed condition and a therapy plan of care.

A PT can directly work with clients in settings such as gyms, corporate wellness programs, fitness centers, or community health programs to offer services like exercise programs, ergonomic evaluations, fall prevention training, stress-reduction exercises, and general health education. These activities are within the licensed scope of practice as long as they remain wellness/preventive in nature (not treatment of a medical condition).

Even though a referral is not needed, the Board Rules provide specific guidelines for PTs when delivering wellness services. Before initiating a wellness or preventive program for a client, the physical therapist must perform an initial screening. The purpose of this screening is to determine whether the individual has any conditions or findings that indicate a need for medical treatment or that would make a physical therapy treatment (as opposed to wellness services) necessary. The PT should discern if the person truly falls into the category of a wellness client or if they actually require standard physical therapy as a patient. According to Rule §307, the PT shall perform a screening to determine whether treatment or wellness/preventive services are indicated and inform the individual of the results. If the screening suggests that the person has a medical issue beyond the scope of wellness services, the PT must recommend appropriate follow-up with a relevant healthcare provider. This aligns with the professional responsibility to refer to a healthcare provider if an underlying condition is suspected – indeed, failing to refer a patient/client when their needs fall outside the PT’s scope is deemed unprofessional conduct.

If the screening finds no contraindications to proceeding with wellness services (meaning the individual is appropriate for preventive care), and the client wishes to proceed, the PT will then assess the client’s wellness needs and develop a written plan for the services. This wellness services plan should describe the activities or interventions to be provided – for example, a structured exercise regimen, educational sessions, or fitness goals tailored to the client. While this plan is not a medical plan of care, it serves to outline the agreed-upon wellness program. The Board Rules require that the PT maintain a written record of the initial screening and the wellness plan for the client. Keeping this documentation is important for accountability and in case the status of the individual changes (if, for instance, something emerges that necessitates a medical referral or if the client later becomes a patient).

After conducting the screening and establishing the plan, the physical therapist may implement the wellness program. PTs are allowed to delegate aspects of wellness and preventive services to assistive personnel. According to Board Rule §307 and related provisions, in a wellness setting, after conducting an appropriate screening as to suitability for wellness or preventive services, a PT may delegate the provision of client wellness or preventive services to a PTA or a technician to assist in carrying out the program. This means that a physical therapist assistant, under the direction of the PT, can help instruct or guide the client through exercise routines or other wellness activities. A physical therapy technician (an unlicensed individual) may also be involved to the extent of their training, under on-site supervision of the PT, to help with non-skilled aspects of the program. It is crucial to note that the PT remains the responsible provider: the PT must ensure the PT Technician or PTA is properly trained for the tasks, and the PT must supervise the wellness services appropriately (the Rules mandate continuous, in-person supervision of a technician during any patient care, and likewise a PT should be readily available when wellness services are provided by support personnel). Essentially, the same standards of

supervision apply to wellness services as they do for traditional therapy services whenever a PTA or technician is involved.

When providing wellness services, PTs should make sure that clients understand the nature of the service. Since wellness services are not formal physical therapy treatment, they may not be reimbursable by health insurance. PTs should also avoid commingling wellness services with skilled therapy in a way that could confuse payers or violate documentation standards. It is advisable to keep separate documentation for wellness services and to use terminology that reflects the preventive nature of the service rather than treatment if no medical plan of care exists. Nevertheless, only licensed individuals may provide these services using the title of physical therapist or representing them as physical therapy – an unlicensed trainer cannot call what they do physical therapy, and a PT should not lend their license to cover unqualified practice. In short, wellness services by a PT are within the scope of practice and are supported by law, but they must be delivered with the same professionalism and ethical standards as any other PT service.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Louisiana Physical Therapy Practice Act and Board Rules provide a clear framework distinguishing traditional physical therapy treatment, maintenance therapy (as a subset of PT aimed at preventing decline), and wellness/preventive services. Physical therapy treatments are directed toward diagnosed conditions and functional impairments, require licensing and involve ongoing assessment and documentation of patient progress. Maintenance therapy is recognized as part of physical therapy practice when it serves the patient's health interests, demanding the same level of documentation and professional judgment to ensure care is necessary and beneficial. Wellness services are an avenue for PTs to apply their expertise in health promotion and prevention for clients in non-clinical settings, but with required initial screening, planning, and proper record-keeping. All these activities must be carried out in accordance with the state laws and rules, and always with the protection of the public's health and safety as the foremost priority.