

LABOUR MOBILITY OF PHYSIOTHERAPISTS

This paper describes the labour mobility of physiotherapists in Canada and the current status of labour mobility issues in physiotherapy.

DESCRIBING THE LABOUR MOBILITY OF PHYSIOTHERAPISTS

There is very little data to describe the labour mobility of physiotherapists or the barriers to the mobility of physiotherapists in Canada. In the absence of specific data, other indicators are explored here.

In 1998, there were 14,752 registered physiotherapists in the 10 provincial jurisdictions (Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators, 1999). The number of physiotherapists in the three territories is estimated at 32. It is not known how many physiotherapists are licensed in more than one province, but that number is likely quite low.

One indicator of the present labour mobility of registered physiotherapists might be the estimated number of “in good standing” letters prepared annually by regulators. Such a letter is required from the home physiotherapy regulator as part of the application process a variety of purposes including registration in another jurisdiction (i.e. for licensure in another province, US state or other international jurisdiction), by some employers, and for other work-related references.

While not ideal, “in good standing letters” give a target indicator of the largest pool one is likely considering. The table below indicates approximate numbers of such letters. For the 9 provinces reporting, around 225 such letters are requested annually. If one factors in an additional 100 letters for Ontario, the estimated total pool (i.e. for labour mobility and all other purposes) might be estimated at 325 or approximately 2% of the total physiotherapy work force. Given that these letters are for a variety of reasons the annual mobility rate for physiotherapists is less than 2%.

Table 1: Estimates of “In good standing letters” requested

	1998	1999
British Columbia	60	60
Alberta	50	50
Saskatchewan	20	25
Manitoba	30	30
Ontario	<i>Not available</i>	<i>Not available</i>
Quebec	10	10
New Brunswick	21	17
Nova Scotia	19	13
Prince Edward Island	2	2
Newfoundland & Labrador	20	20
Total	232	227

The relatively new entry-level competency examination, the Physiotherapy Competency Examination, is generally perceived as the most significant labour barrier. It is helpful that labour market forces are not a complicating factor to understanding the impact of the examination on different provinces. There are good to excellent employment opportunities for physiotherapists in both those jurisdictions where the exam is required (e.g., BC, AB, ON) as well as those where the exam is not required (e.g., SK, NB).

Investigation of available data indicates that the impact of the Physiotherapy Competency Examination as a labour mobility barrier appears quite small. Between 1995 and 1999, the estimated number of physiotherapists that moved from a province that did not require the exam (at that time) to a province that did require the exam is 22 (See Appendix 2). That is, in the past 5 years the exam was a requirement for approximately 22 physiotherapists moving to a province that required the examination. This group of 22 physiotherapists in 5 years *includes* some candidates who postponed the examination for personal reasons (e.g., travel, pregnancy) and others who were returning to Canada after working in the United States.

In summary, physiotherapists are not highly mobile (i.e., less than 2% annually) and the perceived largest barrier (i.e., those physiotherapists who were required to do the Physiotherapy Competency Examination as an additional assessment) affected fewer than 22 physiotherapists in the last 5 years.

CURRENT STATUS OF LABOUR MOBILITY OF PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN CANADA

Under the terms of the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), provincial and territorial governments and their respective regulatory bodies are to assess their legislation and other regulatory requirements and policies to identify areas where recognition and / or reconciliation of standards are needed to decrease or eliminate barriers to the labour mobility of physiotherapists in Canada.

At the 1996 annual meeting of the Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators (The Alliance), the provincial physiotherapy regulators agreed to begin recognition and / or reconciliation of standards. Four (4) areas were initially considered priorities for reconciliation of labour mobility of physiotherapists in Canada. They are: definition of scope of practice, entry to practice requirements, re-entry to practice requirements, maintenance of registration requirements.

Other priority areas were later identified including residency requirements, administrative practices, entry-level examination, credentialling of non Canadian-educated physiotherapists, practice hours, temporary licensure, defining beyond entry-level and developing mechanisms for assessing beyond entry-level.

Scope of Practice

Each physiotherapy regulator has a specific scope of practice statement. Of relevance is whether the description of the scope of practice of any regulator is a barrier to the practice of physiotherapy.

Some physiotherapy regulators have restricted or controlled acts. That is, to do those specific physiotherapy activities (eg., acupuncture) requires specific competencies or qualifications. The additional qualifications of some regulators may restrict the scope of practice in that jurisdiction, but will not act as labour mobility barriers.

This is an area of high similarity that leads to strong mutual recognition. The Physiotherapy Consortium, representing all 10 provincial regulators and the territorial physiotherapists (See Appendix 1) has established that the scope of practice in all jurisdictions is substantially similar and identified The Competency Profile for the Entry-Level Physiotherapist in Canada as a common reference point.

Entry to Practice Requirements

The entry to practice requirements include those educational and examination requirements for Canadian-educated and/or non Canadian-educated physiotherapists including language competency requirements and types or conditions of registration certificates.

In the course of the Physiotherapy Consortium discussions the entry-level requirements that required the most deliberation included: comparing the two established credentialing processes to evaluate the substantial equivalency of the non Canadian-educated to understand if the differences would impact the mutual recognition agreements; understanding the impact of the variable use of and implementation dates for the entry-level national competency examination; reconciling the variable provincial grandparenting dates; and considering a common approach to “in good standing”.

Re-entry to Practice Requirements

This area includes the requirements for Canadian-educated and non-Canadian educated physiotherapists. There are many differences between consortium members, but the Physiotherapy Consortium established that re-entry to practice was not part of the requirements for consideration with respect to labour mobility barriers as AIT only relates to those individuals practising and registered in a Canadian jurisdiction.

Maintenance of Registration

The aspects of maintenance of registration requirements that may act as labour mobility barriers are differing practice hour requirements and continuing competency requirements.

Residency Requirements

The Northwest Territories presently have a hiring preference for local residents. No other member of the Physiotherapy Consortium has a residency requirement.

Administrative practices

The administrative processes were examined to determine if there was expeditious processing of applications and any established accommodation mechanisms available.

All provincial regulators have used and plan to continue to use temporary or conditional licensure as a means to minimize the impact of potential labour barriers. That means when physiotherapists are required to meet a local requirement (i.e. practice hours, examination) of the accepting jurisdiction they can work under a temporary licensure accommodation while they complete the established requirement.

Entry-Level Examination

The number of Canadian physiotherapy regulators that use the Physiotherapy Competency Examination (PCE) as part of their registration process has grown since 1994. All provinces except Québec use the PCE as part of the registration process for non Canadian-educated candidates. In addition, currently six regulators use the PCE for Canadian-educated candidates; these are the physiotherapy regulators in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador. The regulator in Manitoba has had the enabling legislation passed and is considering the development of the associated regulation to begin its use.

The number of candidates taking the exam has been growing since its introduction. In 1995 just over 300 candidates wrote the Written Component of the PCE. By the end of 1999, 561 candidates had taken the written component, almost doubling the initial numbers.

Currently, most entry-level Canadian-educated physiotherapists now do the Physiotherapy Competency Examination upon graduation. In 2000, 480 or approximately 70.1% of the graduates of the 13 Canadian accredited physiotherapy programs (Canadian Physiotherapy Association, 1998) registered for the Written Component and/or the Clinical Component. With the exception of graduates of the education programs in Québec, the registration is generally consistent for most candidates regardless of whether the province of education requires the exam for licensure.

In summary, the majority of physiotherapists licensed in Canada are grandparented from doing the national competency examination, the number of jurisdictions that require the examination for Canadian-educated physiotherapists is now 6, 9 jurisdictions use the examination for non Canadian-educated physiotherapists, the proportion of entry-level physiotherapists now doing the examination is very high (i.e. more than 70%), and the estimate of physiotherapists for whom the examination was a potential labour mobility barrier over the past 5 years was relatively small (i.e., less than 22 physiotherapists in 5 years).

Credentialling of non Canadian-Educated Physiotherapists for Substantially Equivalency

The Physiotherapy Consortium found that the two credentialling processes for registration purposes that may be acceptable under AIT include (i) the Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators (The Alliance) credentialling system (1999) that is used by all Canadian provinces except Québec and (ii) the credentialling process utilized by the Ordre professionnel des physiothérapeutes du Québec (Ordre).

After initial review, these two processes were found to be very similar and The Alliance and Ordre have agreed to work further on establishing their substantial equivalence. This would allow mutual recognition of the processes and eliminate the need for re-evaluation of a physiotherapist that is moving to another jurisdiction in Canada and has already been assessed under The Alliance or Ordre credentialling system.

Practice Hour Requirement

There is a high degree of commonality among those physiotherapy regulators using practice hour requirements. For AIT purposes, all jurisdictions except Québec are considering a common practice hour standard of 1200 hours over five years.

The definition of practice hours is expected to be broad and include worked hours with some consideration for related activities such as volunteer work, professional association work, research, teaching and continuing education.

The receiving jurisdiction will accept the practice hours for a physiotherapist moving to their jurisdiction as defined and verified by the originating jurisdiction.

Temporary or Conditional Licensure, Registration or Certification

Jurisdictions will consider granting temporary or conditional licensure, registration or certification to individual physiotherapists under such terms, conditions or limitations providing that the occupational standard is not lowered.

Individual physiotherapists who do not meet the local occupational requirements may be issued temporary or conditional licensure, registration or certification until such local requirements are met. This may apply to such requirements as mandatory practice hours, national examination or language proficiency.

FUTURE OPTIONS

Beyond Entry-Level and Prior Learning Assessment

At the June 1999 Mutual Recognition meeting, the Physiotherapy Consortium began work to *‘explore and consider a process of substantial equivalency (e.g., Prior Learning Assessment) for use with the fully registered physiotherapist ‘beyond entry-level’ who has not done the national examination and moves to a province that requires it’*. As this situation presents a potential barrier to mobility and, as the recognition of occupational qualifications is a key objective within the Agreement on Internal Trade, the Physiotherapy Consortium is interested in options to reconcile issues related to this group of workers.

While much more is known about the issues and options related to the ‘beyond entry-level’ physiotherapist and Prior Learning Assessment, the Physiotherapy Consortium did not reach a consensus on one or more alternatives. A summary of some of the information considered is included for background purposes as well as an outline of areas that require further study.

Beyond entry-level

Fully registered physiotherapists working in Canada may fall into one of four “categories”. Of most relevance to this paper are those in category 4; however, there are issues that arise with respect to the other categories that require consideration. The 4 categories are:

- **Category 1:** *“Grandparented” from the examination:*
There is a group of physiotherapists in Canada who will be exempt from the national examination because of “grandparenting” status. However, grandparenting dates vary across the country beginning with December 31, 1993. Therefore, if a physiotherapist is working in a jurisdiction with a grandparenting date later than December 31, 1993 and wishes to move to a province with an earlier date, he/she may not meet the examination requirement.

- *Category 2: Successful completion of the examination*
Physiotherapists who have successfully completed the national examination and meet all other provincial requirements should not experience difficulty and are not the focus of discussion.
- *Category 3: Unsuccessful completion of the examination*
This category includes physiotherapists who are granted registration in a Canadian province even though they may have been unsuccessful on the national examination. This group of applicants is of interest to regulators.
- *Category 4: Never attempted the national examination and are not “grandparented”*
Physiotherapists who have never been required to complete the examination and are not eligible for grandparenting are the group that will experience barriers to mobility based upon current registration requirements.

Prior Learning Assessment for Accommodation

Canadian regulators face a situation where they are required to meet obligations under the AIT related to labor mobility. Regulators will be faced with physiotherapist applicants who have work experience in another Canadian jurisdiction but do not meet local requirements. The requirement of greatest concern is the Physiotherapy Competency Examination. As this examination is a competency based national standard, it is critical to ensure that any alternate process does not become a “back door” to subvert national standards.

Canadian regulators including the professions of midwifery, nursing and physiotherapy have begun using Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) most often to evaluate non Canadian-educated applicants in an effort to recognize professional education received as substantially equivalent to that required of a Canadian educated applicant.

The role of Prior Learning Assessment is to offer alternate ways to evaluate and recognize the knowledge and skills of an applicant beyond that offered by a traditional academic or “paper” credential review. PLA recognizes that learning can be acquired from a variety of sources including formal programs, on the job experience, informal education and volunteer activities. PLA is always based upon defined competencies and cannot be applied in the absence of competencies. The use of PLA in credentialing is to supplement traditional methods of review and not to replace them.

As the goal of physiotherapy regulators is to consider alternatives to evaluate the competencies of the experienced registered physiotherapist applicant other than completing the national examination, PLA may be a reasonable methodology for consideration. Currently, the Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators (The Alliance) uses PLA when traditional credentialing reveals “modest” gaps in the educational evaluation of the non Canadian-educated physiotherapist. That review is anchored in the *Competency Profile for the Entry-Level Physiotherapist in Canada* (Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators et. al, 1998) and applicants must meet eligibility requirements.

It is important to note, however, that the current use of PLA is to determine substantial equivalency to allow entrance into a competency-based examination. If PLA is to be used in the absence of other “checks and balances” such as an examination, then the eligibility criteria must be rigorous enough to prevent applicants from subverting national standards.

The concept of reasonable accommodation arose from various disabilities statutes such as the *Americans with Disabilities Act* as well as the educational arena when dealing with students with disabilities. A framework used to determine whether an accommodation is reasonable is helpful to review in the context of this discussion. In general an accommodation is justifiable if:

- It is based upon individual needs;
- It is not of a personal nature;
- It does not impose an undue financial or administrative burden;
- It does not compromise the integrity of the program;
- It does not pose a personal or public threat.

It appears that the use of the PLA process meets a test of what regulators could consider as “reasonable accommodation”. Although the cost of administering a PLA process is unknown at this time, there is evidence based on the existing processes developed and used by The Alliance that the costs may be reasonable and administratively manageable.

Alternative processes, like PLA, may offer a fair and equitable process to physiotherapists who can demonstrate the required competencies. PLA may be a reasonable option to consider because it focuses on evaluating broad learning if it is used in the presence of sound eligibility requirements including a practice threshold and currency of practice.

Future Study

While much has been learned about the issues and options related to the beyond entry-level practitioner and prior learning assessment, to date there is no consensus among members of the Physiotherapy Consortium on a variety of issues.

The Physiotherapy Consortium may consider further study in this area including:

- understanding how other professions have dealt with the “beyond entry-level” practitioner within their approved Mutual Recognition Agreements;
- understanding any human rights issues related to the Canadian-educated beyond entry-level practitioner;
- developing a common understanding of a definition of the beyond entry-level practitioner;
- developing a common understanding of the features of a PLA process for beyond entry-level physiotherapists;
- exploring which tools can be used for PLA and the equivalency of different PLA tools;
- developing a common understanding of the costs of a PLA process;
- exploring options for administering a PLA process.

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Appendix 2

Estimate³ of Canadian Physiotherapists Where the National Exam was a Possible Labour Barrier in 1995-1999					
National Exam	Year of Graduation	School of Education	Prov of Residence at time of application	Count	Total
Jun-95		-	-		0
Nov-95	1994	U of AB	ON	1	1
Jun-96	1994	McGill	ON	2	2
Nov-96	1994	Dalhousie	BC	1	
	1994	UBC	ON	1	
	1995	Dalhousie	BC	2	
	1995	U of AB	BC	1	5
Apr-97	1996	McGill	BC	1	1
Sept -97	1995	UBC	ON	1	1
Apr-98	1995	Laval	BC	1	
	1997	McGill	ON	2	3
Oct-98	1997	U of Sask.	AB	1	1
Apr-99	1995	Laval	ON	1	
	1996	McGill	ON	1	
	1997	U of Sask	BC	1	3
Oct-99	1996	McGill	AB	1	
	1996	U of Sask.	BC	1	
	1997	U of Montreal	ON	1	
	1998	U of Montreal	BC	1	
	1998	Dalhousie	ON	1	5
TOTAL Estimate	1995-1999				22