

Physical Therapist Workforce

Labor Shortage Symposium
Marc Goldstein, EdD
May 20, 2009



Current Environment

- **Based on evidence from a number of sources, it appears that currently there is a shortage of physical therapists**
- **By using vacancy rates as a proxy, APTA research has shown that the vacancy rate in acute care hospitals is 13.8%; in long term care settings 18.6%; and in outpatient settings 13.1%**

Current Environment

- **Much of the shortage is a result of the Balanced Budget Act (BBA) of 1997**
 - **Lower reimbursement rates led to changes in staffing. Physical therapists had benefits cut, hours reduced**
 - **Profession became less attractive to potential physical therapists**
 - **“Pipeline” decreased and the supply of physical therapists diminished**

Current Environment

- **Generally, APTA believes that the shortage is more severe in various geographic location, practice settings**
 - **Rural areas**
 - **Skilled nursing, long term care facilities**

Causes of Shortage

- **There will likely be an increased demand for physical therapy services in the future**
 - **Increased number of individuals with limited function, disability**
 - **Baby boom generation is aging; likelihood of stroke, heart disease increases**
 - **Increased survival of individuals from catastrophic events⁵**

Strategies to Reduce Shortage

- **Higher salaries paid by employers; more benefits e.g., continuing education reimbursed. Median salary has increased from \$62,000 to \$80,000 between 2002 and 2008**
- **Changing the role of the physical therapist; move them from a salaried employee to one having more autonomy in practice, e.g., practice privileges**

Strategies to Reduce Shortage (cont'd)

- **Design alternative payment for physical therapists—Reimbursement based on CPT coding is really not relevant for physical therapy**
- **Increase visibility of physical therapist workforce issues among policy makers**
 - **Create a National Commission for the Study of Health Care Workforce**

Consequences of Shortage

- **Fortunately, the shortage does not seem to have affected quality of care.**
 - **When respondents to APTA's Vacancy Rate surveys were asked if they perceived quality was diminished based on shortages, they indicated that it did not.**
 - **The job environment may have changed in that PTs practiced longer hours, but the provision of service to patients was maintained.**

The *Potential* Future

- **It is likely that the shortage will be exacerbated. Demand will likely increase because of changes in population demographics and the fact that physical therapy is being seen as an option for the treatment of movement disorders by more citizens.**