

January 22, 2020

Patricia Connors  
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Dear Ms. Connors,

Thank you for engaging with Doctors Nova Scotia and the Council of Family Doctors as you consider how best to improve access to physiotherapists.

Based on the content you provided for the Council, we are happy to support your efforts to reduce the need for insurers to require a physician note for patients to access physiotherapy services.

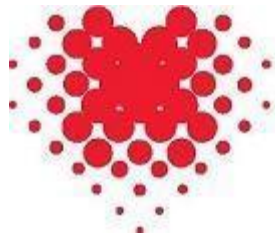
The Section of Family Doctors Council is supportive, when clinically appropriate, of initiatives that reduce administrative burden for family physicians, particularly when the work is generated by employers to manage costs and employee behaviour.

To support your association's efforts, I will also share our concerns with the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Gorman", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Mary Gorman  
Chair of the Council of Family Physicians



Nova Scotia  
Physiotherapy  
Association

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## BRIEFING NOTE

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**Subject:** Role of Physiotherapy in Improving Timely Access to Services  
**Prepared by:** Patricia Connors, Executive Director | Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association  
Jessica Padmos, Advocacy Committee Chair | Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association  
Stephen Richey, President | Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association  
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**Submitted to:** Policy and Health Issues Committee | Doctors Nova Scotia

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### Introduction

The Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association is a professional association representing over 750 physiotherapists and physiotherapy students in Nova Scotia. We are a branch of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association which represents over 21,000 members across Canada. The mission of the Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association is to support its members and advance the profession of physiotherapy in order to improve the health and wellness of Nova Scotians.

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### Background

In 1999 physiotherapists in Nova Scotia were given direct access, meaning all residents of Nova Scotia could access physiotherapy without a physician's referral. At the time, the Minister of Health, Jim Smith, said "We believe this change will benefit the public, it will reduce delays in getting treatment and offer an alternative access point into the health care system."<sup>(1)</sup> To further this point, the then president of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia Robert Mullan said "We support this change and will continue to work with our colleagues in the physiotherapy profession to provide the best care and treatment for our patients".<sup>(1)</sup>

This highlights the fact that physiotherapy is a self-regulated profession, meaning we are held to the same level of standard of all primary care professions and act in the best interest of the public<sup>(2)</sup>. Further, physiotherapy is one of a few self-regulated, primary care professions that are often covered and accessed through third party health insurance programs (TPHIPs). This positions physiotherapy as one of the few health professions that can be accessed privately and also has members who are able to assess, diagnose, treat and refer within the Nova Scotia Health Authority.

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## Summary of Issue

While healthcare in Nova Scotia has its challenges, we remain fortunate in our ability to access universal healthcare. However, with increasing demands on the healthcare system and the shortage of family physicians in Nova Scotia<sup>(3)</sup>, the ability for citizens to access healthcare in a timely manner is decreasing, creating a significant problem.

Despite the challenges faced by the public healthcare system, many Nova Scotians have the option to seek physiotherapy treatment through a third party health insurance program (TPHIP), such as Blue Cross or Sun Life. However, many insurance companies still require a physician's referral to access physiotherapy and we believe this is an unnecessary burden to the system and barrier for timely access to physiotherapy services in our province.

The Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association believes self-referral benefits Nova Scotians by providing more choice, improved access to care, faster recovery, and reduced health care costs.

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## Request

The Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association (NSPA) is seeking an endorsement from Doctors Nova Scotia in support of our current initiative to lobby employers, extended health providers, government and bureaucrats to remove the requirement of a Physician's referral imposed by Insurance providers. We believe this will improve timely access to our services and have a positive impact on the health system here in our province.

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## Impact on the Health System

The Government and Residents of Nova Scotia have long trusted physiotherapists with the handling of their musculoskeletal issues, demonstrated by granting direct access. However, many insurance companies still require a physician's referral. This creates three primary issues in our current healthcare system:

1. Unfairly downloading cost to the healthcare system by requiring a visit that is billed through MSI prior to assessment by a physiotherapist.
2. Unnecessary visit to a doctor's office, taking away time that could be used for patients that require a medical opinion.
3. Delaying access to timely healthcare and thus increasing the cost to the system through development of persistent pain, and potential increased instances of opioid use.

### ***Cost to the system***

The requirement of a doctor's referral to access physiotherapy through a TPHIP is an unnecessary cost to the healthcare system. Physiotherapy is a self-regulated profession that is an integral part of the primary health team and this was recognized by granted physiotherapy direct access in Nova Scotia in 1999. Granting direct access recognized physiotherapist's ability to assess, and treat within our own scope and practice while understanding when referral to another professional or physician is required. For insurance companies to require a referral when the government and healthcare system do not, leads to redundancy of care, which directly costs the public healthcare system.

### ***Unnecessary Visits***

Physiotherapy, as a primary care profession, is a fully autonomous, self-regulated profession. Should a Nova Scotian want to access a physiotherapist privately, they only have to book an appointment. Physiotherapists can then assess, diagnose, and carry out their treatment plan, accepting full liability and responsibility for their patient. As a result, it is unnecessary for a person to require a physician's referral as their referral is not providing any assurance or liability over the physiotherapist. As a result the referral itself is only kept by the patient to be provided to their insurance company to ensure reimbursement.

### ***Delaying access to appropriate healthcare***

The increasing wait times for health care in Nova Scotia are well documented. The lack of access to health professionals due to limited points of entry creates a "bottle neck" for many Nova Scotians. For any Nova Scotians experiencing a musculoskeletal issue, they must rely on their family doctor, or if they don't have a family doctor then a walk-in clinic or emergency department. This delay in treatment can often lead patients to developing persistent pain<sup>(4)</sup> due to a lack of treatment or to a potential use of opioid pain medication<sup>(5)</sup>.

Furthermore, physiotherapists are skilled practitioners in the treatment of issues beyond musculoskeletal issues. For the average muscle strain or ligament sprain a delay in treatment may not result in any complications. However, physiotherapists are integral in the treatment of pre- and post-natal health issues in women, falls risk assessment and prevention/reduction in the elderly, community health programs, in-home physiotherapy, and stroke and neurological rehabilitation to name a few. In these cases, timely access is of the utmost importance to reduce to risk of further complications. As public awareness of the value and importance of exercise in terms of management of a pathology, the role of physiotherapy is increasing in importance. As such, it is critical that Nova Scotians be able to have as few barriers to this care as possible.

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## **Potential Solutions**

Our goal is to be involved in continued collaboration and seek support from all stakeholders towards a better outcome for the residents of Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association feels that improvements in the issues outlined above can be achieved by:

1. Legislation limiting or eliminating the requirement of a physician's referral for access to physiotherapy in Nova Scotia when using a TPHIP.
2. Direction to insurance companies, employers, and employee representatives to consider alternative ways to control cost of their health insurance plans.

## ***Legislation***

Over the last number of years there have been legislative changes with a focus on improving access to healthcare. Legislation focused on eliminating or limiting the need for a physician referral in order to be assessed by a physiotherapist achieves this goal. It would eliminate an inefficient barrier to accessible care, an unnecessary cost to the system and allow physiotherapists to continue providing high quality care.

## ***Direction to Insurance Companies***

Physiotherapists have long felt that the requirement of a physician's referral to access their services through TPHIPs is an unnecessary barrier and burden on the healthcare system. A recent report by a consultant for the Canadian Physiotherapy Association <sup>(6)</sup>, unfortunately, demonstrated the reasoning for keeping this requirement. Most insurance companies use this tactic in conjunction with employers to control the costs the program. Each time an employee accesses a service, such as physiotherapy, the employer is charged a small fee. To discourage employees from using these services, insurance companies give the plans limiting factors such as per session reimbursement limits, per year limits, pay and submit reimbursement, and most commonly, the requirement of a doctor's referrals. This underpins the idea that this requirement is not due to the need for oversight of physiotherapy but instead used as a tactic to reduce the utilization of the service. This in turn downloads some of these costs to the public healthcare system, just so employees can access the service for which they are paying.

Direction from the government to all stakeholders involved in development and implementation of TPHIPs, discouraging the use of the doctor's referral as a cost control method would have a significant effect on public perception and negotiation. As highlighted above there remains many ways for insurance companies and employers to negotiate ways to control the cost of their TPHIP; however, all of the other methods don't rely on or cost the public healthcare system.

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## References

1. "Nova Scotians now have direct access to physiotherapists" Accessed June 12, 2019 from <https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=19990322001>
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5. Sun E, Moshfegh J, Rishel CA, Cook CE, Goode AP, George SZ. Association of Early Physical Therapy With Long-term Opioid Use Among Opioid-Naive Patients With Musculoskeletal Pain. *JAMA Netw Open*.
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