

College of Physical Therapists of Alberta
Core Standards and Ethics Project

**Core Code of Ethics for Physiotherapists
in Canada**

FINAL

May 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	Introduction	1
	1.1 Background	1
	1.2 Purpose of the Core Code of Ethics.....	1
	1.3 Underpinning Ethical Principles and Values	1
	1.4 How to Use the Core Code of Ethics	2
2.0	The Core Code of Ethics	3
	Appendix A: Professional Values	5
	Appendix B: Glossary	6
	Appendix C: Bibliography	7

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Codes of Ethics are one component of a continuum of documents including standards of practice, position statements, practice guidelines, Essential Competencies, and Entry-to-Practice Milestones which direct the practice of professionals to provide **quality**¹ care. In the physiotherapy² profession each regulatory organization in Canada has its own set of standards and code of ethics, even though physiotherapy practice is more similar than dissimilar across the country. The Core Code of Ethics has been developed to reflect current and future practice trends, and to be generally applicable to all physiotherapists in Canada. The Core Code of Ethics is intended to serve as a guide and resource to Canadian physiotherapy regulatory organizations.

1.2 Purpose of the Core Code of Ethics

The Core Code of Ethics is a description of the ethical responsibilities of a physiotherapist that guides ethical **practice**. It is a moral anchor that assures **clients**³, the public, and other health care providers that physiotherapists strive for the highest standards of ethical practice.

The Core Code of Ethics applies to all physiotherapists in all contexts of practice and through all stages of their career. It provides ethical guidance to *assist physiotherapists to determine ethical versus unethical practice*. It should be used in conjunction with relevant provincial legislation and with regulations, standards, policies, and procedures that regulate professional practice.

1.3 Underpinning Ethical Principles and Values

Bioethical principles form the foundations of physiotherapy ethical practice and provide guidance along the pathway to ethical decision-making. While there are several approaches to ethical principles, this document uses the principles described in Table 1 as a basic guide to ethical practice.

¹ A glossary of terms is included at the end of this document. Terms included in the Glossary are indicated in **bold** the first time they appear in the Standards.

² The terms physical therapy/physiotherapy and physical therapist/physiotherapist are considered synonymous and are used interchangeably in this document.

³ Clients are recipients of physiotherapy services, and may be individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, or populations. An individual client may also be referred to as a patient. In some circumstances clients/patients may be represented by their substitute decision-makers. [Adapted from National Physiotherapy Advisory Group. (2016). *Essential Competencies and Entry to Practice Milestones*. (Presently under development.)]

Principles	Interpretation
Respect for Autonomy	This principle states that people should be allowed to make decisions that apply to their lives and to have control over their lives as much as possible. Autonomy requires a physiotherapist to respect clients' freedom to decide for themselves and includes obtaining informed consent.
Beneficence	The principle of beneficence guides the practitioner to do what is good with respect to the welfare of the client. In physiotherapy practice, the physiotherapist should provide benefit to the client's health.
Least Harm	This is similar to beneficence, but deals with situations in which none of the choices available are judged to be the best. In this case, a practitioner should choose to do the least harm possible and to do harm to the fewest people. For physiotherapists this may mean recommending an intervention that is the best of two alternatives even though both alternatives may have negative side effects.
Justice	Justice requires that the actions chosen are objective and equitable to those involved. An ethical decision that relates to justice has a consistent logical basis that supports the decision. For physiotherapists, justice relates to treating people fairly and to allocating resources fairly between clients.

In addition to the ethical principles, there are several professional values that help to support ethical practice in physiotherapy - these are the values that underpin and motivate a physiotherapist's efforts every day and inspire all of their actions. The key values include responsibility, excellence, trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, professionalism, citizenship, respect, dignity, communication, collaboration, advocacy, transparency, and well-being. These values are described in Appendix 1.

1.4 How to Use the Core Code of Ethics

The Core Code of Ethics is designed to help the physiotherapist understand when an action is ethical as opposed to unethical. The Code does not tell practitioners exactly how to act in every situation, rather it provides a benchmark against which to measure ethical decisions in everyday practice and in highly complex situations. As professionals, physiotherapists should be very clear about, and be able to articulate, their rationale for all ethical decisions and should take responsibility for their decision-making and actions in fulfilling their duty of care to those whom they serve.

Ethical decisions should uphold all elements of the Core Code of Ethics. If they do not, physiotherapists may need to re-think the situation and ask for assistance, if necessary, in order to make a decision that will meet the expectations outlined in the Code.

⁴ Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2001). *Principles of biomedical ethics*. Oxford university press.

SECTION 2: THE CORE CODE OF ETHICS

The ethical responsibilities are described under three headings: those that apply to the client; those that apply to the public and society; and those that apply to the individual practitioner, the profession, and other health care providers. The ethical responsibilities are intended to serve as a reference to guide good ethical practice and help to prevent unethical behaviours and choices.

1. Responsibilities to Clients.

Physiotherapists:

- 1.1 Are committed to working in partnership with clients to improve, support and/or sustain their health status and well-being.
- 1.2 Demonstrate sensitivity toward individual clients, respecting and taking into consideration their unique rights, needs, beliefs, values, culture, goals, and environmental context.
- 1.3 Respect and support the autonomy of clients to participate in the management and decision-making regarding their health.
- 1.4 Respect clients' freedom of choice, even when it differs from the physiotherapist's recommendation.
- 1.5 Provide an alternative treatment option through referral to another health care provider/physiotherapist if the **therapeutic relationship is compromised**.
- 1.6 Respect and follow the principles of informed consent including explaining service options, risks, benefits, and potential outcomes of refusing treatment or services; and avoiding coercion.
- 1.7 Respect clients' rights to refuse or withdraw from services, or seek services from another health care provider.
- 1.8 Respect and protect clients' rights to confidentiality and privacy of personal information.
- 1.9 Use **electronic communication and social media** professionally and respectfully, conforming to confidentiality guidelines.
- 1.10 Are committed to participating as effective and respectful collaborative team members.
- 1.11 Practice physiotherapy according to their own competence, referring the client to others as necessary.
- 1.12 Participate in continuing professional development to maintain/improve knowledge and skills.
- 1.13 Practice in a manner that promotes the safety of clients, other health care providers, and themselves during the provision of services.
- 1.14 Maintain professional boundaries that honour and respect the therapeutic relationship with clients.
- 1.15 Adhere to legislation, regulations, and guidelines which guide client care.

2. Responsibilities to the Public and Society.

Physiotherapists:

- 2.1 Support and promote health and timely access to care.
- 2.2 Evaluate the quality and impact of their services regularly.
- 2.3 Conduct and present themselves with integrity and professionalism.
- 2.4 Are professionally and morally responsible for addressing incompetent, unsafe, illegal, or unethical practice of another health care provider and legally responsible for reporting conduct that puts the client at risk to the appropriate authority/ies.
- 2.5 **Advocate** within their capacity and context to address specific clients' needs and the broad determinants of health.

- 2.6 Work effectively within the health care system and manage public resources responsibly.
- 2.7 Take responsibility for their own physical and mental health and refrain from practicing physiotherapy while their ability to provide appropriate and competent care is adversely affected (e.g., by communicable or serious illness, injury, alcohol, drugs, or emotional distress).

3.0 Responsibilities to the Individual Practitioner, the Profession, and other Health Care Providers.

Physiotherapists:

- 3.1 Work effectively and respectfully with other health care providers through team work, referrals, and collaborative problem solving.
- 3.2 Refrain from harassment, abuse or discrimination of clients, colleagues, employees, or students.
- 3.3 Act transparently and with integrity in all business and employment practices including fees and billing; advertising of professional services; and real and/or perceived conflicts of interest.
- 3.4 Communicate physiotherapy best practices and evidence to other physiotherapists, health care providers, and students.
- 3.5 Contribute to the development of the profession through engagement in activities such as evidence-based practice, support of research, mentoring, and student supervision.

Appendix 1: Professional Values

Values	Interpretation
Responsibility	To be trusted to accomplish required tasks/procedures independently, appropriately and completely, assuming full accountability for actions.
Excellence	To strive for excellence through learning and continued professional development of knowledge, skills, judgment, and attitudes to enhance professional practice.
Trustworthiness, Honesty and Integrity	To act with honesty and integrity, adhering to moral and ethical principles in the delivery of high quality, safe, and professional services.
Professionalism and Citizenship	To exemplify the highest level of professionalism as a member of the profession of physiotherapy; to demonstrate a broad commitment to society and to uphold the social contract between physiotherapists and their clients.
Respect and Dignity	To treat all individuals in a manner that recognizes and appreciates their uniqueness and self-worth; to interact with clients, colleagues, and the public respectfully considering their dignity at all times.
Communication and Collaboration	To practice respectful communication at all times; to value the contribution of all individuals involved in the care of a client in order to achieve the best possible outcomes.
Equity and Advocacy	To contribute within a physiotherapist's capacity and practice context to creating equal opportunities for health and reducing health inequities; to support and promote the rights of the client in the health care system.
Transparency	To be open, communicative, and accountable, always operating in such a way that it is easy for others to see what actions are performed and why. ⁵
Well-Being	To strive for client well-being as it is affected by social, economic, and environmental factors. To attend to one's own well-being in order to provide the best physiotherapy care possible.

⁵ Schnackenberg, A.K. & Tomlinson, E.C. (2014). *Organizational Transparency: A New Perspective on Managing Trust in Organization-Stakeholder Relationships*. Available at: <http://jom.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/03/06/0149206314525202>

Appendix 2: Glossary

Advocate is work that healthcare professionals do in response to a range of factors outside the healthcare system that negatively influence health outcomes. It moves beyond just working at the level of the individual patient providing counselling on matters related to healthy lifestyle. It requires working at various levels to address the root causes of illness and inequities in health.⁶

Clients are recipients of physiotherapy services, and may be individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, or populations. An individual client may also be referred to as a patient. In some circumstances clients/patients may be represented by their substitute decision-makers.⁷

Compromised refers to a therapeutic relationship in which professional boundaries have broken down. This may be due to a number of factors such as sexual relations, financial dealings, social interactions, conflict of interest, differences in values, and breach of confidentiality.⁸

Electronic communication and social media refer to “software, applications, e-mail, and websites, which enable users to interact, create, and exchange information online.”⁹ While not strictly speaking electronic communication or social media, the use of videography or the taking and communication of photographs are included in this definition relating to technology.

Practice means any role, whether remunerated or not, in which the individual uses their skills and knowledge as a practitioner in their regulated health profession. For the purposes of this code, practice is not restricted to the provision of direct clinical care. It also includes using professional knowledge in a direct non-clinical relationship with patients or clients, working in management, administration, education, research, advisory, regulatory or policy development roles, and any other roles that have an impact on safe, effective delivery of health services in the health profession.¹⁰

Professionalism is the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served.¹¹

Quality of health care services refers to the “acceptability, accessibility, appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, and safety”¹² of the services provided.

⁶ Dharamsi S, Woollard B, Okullo I, Kendal P, Macnab A. (2013). Health Promoting Schools as Learning Sites for Physicians In-Training. *Health Education*. 114(3):186 – 196.

⁷ Adapted from National Physiotherapy Advisory Group. (2016). *Essential Competencies and Entry to Practice Milestones*. (Presently under development.)

⁸ Ontario College of Occupational Therapists. (2009). *Standards for Professional Boundaries*. Available at: http://www.coto.org/pdf/publications/COTO_StandardsProfessionalBoundaries_ENG.pdf

⁹ Ontario College of Teachers. (2011). *Professional Advisory Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media*. Available at: <https://www.oct.ca/media/PDF/Advisory%20Social%20Media/ProfAdvSocMediaENPRINT.pdf>

¹⁰ Physiotherapy Board of Australia. (2014). *Code of Conduct*. Available at:

<http://www.physiotherapyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines/Code-of-conduct.aspx>

¹¹ Epstein, R.M. & Hundert, E.M. (2002). *Defining and Assessing Professional Competence*. *JAMA* 287(2):226–235.

¹² Health Quality Council of Alberta. (2005). *Alberta Quality Matrix for Health*. Available at: https://d10k7k7mywg42z.cloudfront.net/assets/53288634f002ff214000014b/HQCA_Quality_Matrix_061713.pdf

Therapeutic Relationship refers to the relationship that exists between a physical therapist and a patient during the course of physical therapy treatment. The relationship is based on trust, respect and the expectation that the physical therapist will establish and maintain the relationship according to applicable legislation and regulatory requirements and will not harm or exploit the patient in any way.¹³

¹³ Adapted from the College of Physical Therapists of Alberta. (2007). *Therapeutic Relationships Establishing and Maintaining Professional Boundaries - a Resource Guide for Physical Therapists*. Available at: https://www.physiotherapyalberta.ca/files/guide_therapeutic_relations.pdf

Appendix 3: Bibliography¹⁴

Fiester, A. (2007). *Why the Clinical Ethics We Teach Fails Patients*. *Acad Med.*, 82: 684–689.

Swisher, L.L., Hiller, P. (2010). The Revised APTA Code of Ethics for the Physical Therapist and Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant: Theory, Purpose, Process, and Significance. *Physical Therapy*, 90(5): 803-824.

American Physical Therapy Association. (2013). *Code of Ethics*. Available at: http://www.apta.org/uploadedFiles/APTAorg/About_Us/Policies/HOD/Ethics/CodeofEthics.pdf

Canadian Physiotherapy Association. (2013). *Code of Ethics*. Available at: <http://www.physiotherapy.ca/About-Physiotherapy/Code-of-Ethics>

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. (2012). *Code of Professional Values and Behaviour*. Available at: <http://www.csp.org.uk/professional-union/professionalism/csp-expectations-members/code-professional-values-behaviour>

Edwards, I., Delany, C.M., Townsend, A.F. & Swisher, L.L. (2011). Moral Agency as Enacted Justice: A Clinical and Ethical Decision-Making Framework for Responding to Health Inequities and Social Injustice. *Physical Therapy* 91(11):1653-63.

Edwards I., Delany, C.M., Townsend, A.F. & Swisher, L.L. (2011). New Perspectives on the Theory of Justice: Implications for Physical Therapy Ethics and Clinical Practice. *Physical Therapy*, 91(11):1642-52.

MacDonald, C. (2006). Considerations for Writing a Code of Ethics. In Gene Marks, ed., *Streetwise Small Business Book of Lists*. Available at: <http://www.ethicsweb.ca/codes/writing-a-code-of-ethics.htm>

Physiotherapy Board of Australia. (2014). *Code of Conduct*. Available at: <http://www.physiotherapyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines/Code-of-conduct.aspx>

Physiotherapy New Zealand and The Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand. (2011). *Aotearoa New Zealand Physiotherapy Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. Available at: http://www.physioboard.org.nz/sites/default/files/NZ_Physiotherapy_Code_of_Ethics_final_0.pdf

¹⁴ The Codes of Ethics of Physiotherapy Regulators in Canada were also reviewed during the preparation of the Core Code.