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**VETERANS ADMINISTRATION PHYSICAL THERAPIST
QUALIFICATION STANDARDS SHOULD BE UPDATED TO
BETTER SERVE VETERANS**

More Physical Therapists Needed for Changing Veteran Population

ALEXANDRIA, VA, Oct 19, 2007 — The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) should update physical therapist qualification standards to encourage more physical therapists to serve aging and injured veterans, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) told the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health on Thursday, Oct 18. Current VA standards, which have not been updated in nearly 25 years, are preventing many physical therapists (PTs) from joining the VA, which is facing a growing population of veterans who require physical therapist services.

“The VA has not kept pace with current physical therapist qualification standards, which is severely hampering efforts to recruit and retain qualified therapists,” said Jeffrey Newman, PT, Chief of the Physical Therapy Department at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, speaking on behalf of APTA. “As our veteran population ages, and with new challenges facing wounded warriors returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, those standards should be updated to better serve our nation’s heroes.”

VA standards are inconsistent with the current professional practice of physical therapy. The VA does not recognize the doctor of physical therapy (DPT) degree, though approximately 80 percent of physical therapist education programs offer doctorate credentials. In addition, VA guidelines still only require PTs to hold a bachelor’s degree, in spite of professional accreditation standards requiring a minimum of a master’s degree to practice.

These inconsistencies provide disincentives for qualified PTs to practice in the VA system, which will need more health care professionals to meet new challenges. According to the VA, 38 percent of the veteran population — approximately 9.2 million veterans — are age 65 or older. This proportion is expected to rise to 45% by 2033.

Meanwhile, enhancements in battlefield medicine allow larger numbers of American soldiers to survive combat injuries. PTs are instrumental in providing treatment for chronic diseases facing aging veterans, such as diabetes, and injuries sustained by wounded warriors, such as traumatic brain injury, amputation, nerve damage, burns, and mental health and readjustment.

Newman proposed the VA:

- Recognize PTs' educational and clinical training,
- Recognize the Doctoral Degree in Physical Therapy,
- Clarify a VA career ladder for PTs,
- Expand opportunities for career advancement for PTs.

“The US Department of Veterans Affairs is facing the need for more physical therapists to treat aging and wounded veterans, though the agency’s current therapy standards do not reflect that reality,” said APTA President R Scott Ward, PT, PhD. “By updating its physical therapist qualification standards, the VA will attract more qualified therapists to better serve our nation’s veterans.”

“Immediately implementing a handful of common-sense qualification standards will bring the VA in line with modern physical therapist practice,” APTA Federal Physical Therapy Section President Mala J. Waller, PT, said. “Recruiting and retaining qualified physical therapists should be a top priority for the VA, especially with the new challenges that come with an aging veteran population and troops coming home with traumatic injuries. Updated qualification standards will ensure VA physical therapists are able to provide quality care for the wide variety of conditions faced by veterans.”

Physical therapists are health care professionals who diagnose and manage individuals of all ages, from newborns to elders, who have medical problems or other health-related conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. Physical therapists examine each individual and develop a plan of care using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. Physical therapists also work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility by developing fitness- and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

The American Physical Therapy Association (www.apta.org) is a national organization representing more than 72,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students nationwide. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapist education, practice, and research. Consumers can access "Find a PT" to find a physical therapist in their area, as well as physical therapy news and information at www.apta.org/consumer.

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