

Statement for the Record

American Physical Therapy Association

**House Energy & Commerce Committee
“Federal Efforts to Combat the Opioid Crisis:
A Status Update on CARA and Other Initiatives”**

October 25, 2017

On behalf of our more than 100,000 member physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) appreciates the opportunity to submit comments to the House Energy and Commerce Committee as it strives to address the concerns relating to pharmacological pain management.

Physical therapists play an important role in managing acute and chronic pain by administering treatments that include strengthening and flexibility exercises, manual therapy, posture awareness, and body mechanics instruction. Nonpharmacological therapies, such as physical therapy, offer an alternative to opioids and other pharmacologics for pain by helping patients improve their function and range of motion, and understand the underlying causes of their pain.

APTA seeks to fight the opioid epidemic and positively influence public health and well-being by enhancing prescriber, patient, and policymaker understanding of safe and effective pain management through interdisciplinary care that improves movement and function. We actively work to enhance awareness of and access to pain management options that best suit patients’ needs, goals, and desires, which can ultimately play a major role in turning around our nation’s opioid epidemic. APTA has taken an active role in combating opioid addiction by promoting physical therapy as a viable alternative to opioids to manage acute and chronic pain. As part of this effort, last year APTA launched the #ChoosePT campaign to educate consumers on the unique role physical therapy plays in the treatment of pain. For more information about the campaign, please see: <http://www.moveforwardpt.com/Default.aspx>.

As Congress continues to explore ways to address the crisis, APTA is pleased to make the following recommendations:

Recognition and Promotion of Effective Nonpharmacological Pain Management Treatments

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidelines for prescribing opioids for chronic pain. The CDC made clear within its guidelines that there are better, safer ways to treat chronic pain than the use of opioids, specifically stating that many nonpharmacological therapies, including physical therapy, can ameliorate chronic pain. It is important for stakeholders to be able to recognize physical therapy as a nonpharmacological option that is considered a safe and effective treatment for pain.

Accordingly, as Congress develops policies and practices for combating drug addiction, with a particular focus on the opioid epidemic, ***APTA recommends that Congress more effectively promote the different types of nonpharmacological treatments that are effective for the treatment of pain and put forth recommendations related to such.***

Advancement of Safe and Effective Interdisciplinary, Nonpharmacological Pain Management Care Models

Pain management often needs a comprehensive, integrative approach that focuses on nonpharmacological, interdisciplinary interventions. Successful interdisciplinary pain management models encompass multiple disciplines—including physical therapy, nursing, pharmacy, primary care, and behavioral health—that encourage providers to work as a unified team in the delivery of care. Better supporting the development of and access to interdisciplinary, comprehensive pain management models that evaluate and treat the different factors influencing the presence of pain will only serve to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and safety of care delivered to patients with pain.

Accordingly, as Congress develops policies and practices for addressing the opioid epidemic, ***APTA recommends that Congress prioritize the evaluation, development, and improvement of interdisciplinary pain management models that are safe and effective for the treatment of chronic pain.***

Clinician and Patient Education

APTA strongly believes that dissemination of information and education about valuable alternatives to opioids for the treatment of pain, such as physical therapy, will help to move this nation forward in its efforts to improve pain management and promote safe opioid prescribing. Clinicians must be equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to be able to evaluate treatment options for a patient's pain, both pharmacological and nonpharmacological, and provide a well-informed recommendation on the best treatment for pain management, specific to the needs of the patient.

Patients often do not have the knowledge or opportunity to engage in informed, shared decision-making about the different treatment possibilities for their acute or chronic pain. They desire results and rely on the wisdom of their health care providers to offer them the best treatment option. If clinicians have not been educated on pain management solutions other than over-the-counter or prescription medications, and how such options may suit patients' needs, then alternative treatments such as physical therapy will neither be discussed nor offered to patients. This not only places patients at a significant

disadvantage during the course of treatment but, at the same time, encourages overuse of opioids to treat pain.

The message that successful pain management requires the use of nonpharmacological therapies must be conveyed and reinforced to clinicians, as well as to patients, payers, and the general public. As discussions evolve related to what federal efforts should be undertaken to address the opioid epidemic, ***APTA recommends that Congress provide resources to support training and education to prescribers and others who are directly involved in the management or support of patients with pain, on the value of nonpharmacological treatments and how to recognize when such therapy options are the safer, more effective option for the patient's condition.***

Additionally, educating patients on how to manage their pain is a key component to effectively reducing pain intensity and interference. As patients acquire information related to the management of their condition, their sense of empowerment grows. Being empowered by their health care providers can help patients actively manage their pain, resulting in improved outcomes and reduced costs of care. To support the promotion of patient empowerment and self-reliance, however, clinicians must be educated on the methods by which they can empower their patients. ***APTA urges Congress to recognize the benefits of patient empowerment as it relates to pain management, and the methods and materials most effective in educating clinicians on patient empowerment.***

Eliminating Barriers to Nonpharmacological Pain Management Treatments

As the health care industry moves forward, it is imperative that patients have direct access to nonpharmacological pain management treatments, including physical therapy, as well as interdisciplinary pain management models. Given that the CDC has concluded there is insufficient evidence that opioid use alone improves functional outcomes for those in pain, we recommend that if a clinician prescribes an opioid for pain, then the clinician also refer a patient to physical therapy. Research has demonstrated that when a patient in pain receives early access to a physical therapist, the patient experiences improved functional outcomes, and there is a significant reduction in overall costs.

Unfortunately, barriers to nonpharmacological pain management treatments continue to persist. For example, many insurers continue to promote the use of medications while restricting access to safer, more cost-effective nonpharmacological therapies. Other barriers include patient attitudes toward pharmacological and nonpharmacological therapies, gaps in clinician knowledge, high copayments, and time and visit limits. Until such barriers are addressed, access to nonpharmacological therapies will continue to remain limited, and opioids will remain a go-to quick fix for pain despite their dangerous side effects and, in some instances, long-term ineffectiveness. Moreover, reducing the number of barriers to nonpharmacological treatments will help to inform the design of effective strategies for increasing use of these treatments. There must be a commitment to ensuring that patients have access to the appropriate therapy for pain management and treatment. ***APTA strongly encourages Congress to examine and resolve the existing barriers to nonpharmacological treatments, including interdisciplinary pain management models of care.***

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and look forward to partnering with Congress, as well as with the greater community, in a joint effort to improve the safety and quality of care for patients. Should you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Kara Gainer, director of regulatory affairs, at karagainer@apta.org or 703/706-8547. Thank you for your consideration.