

The future for postgraduate specialty clinical course work masters programs in Australia

Gwendolen A Jull¹ and Peter O'Sullivan²

¹Clinical Consultant, Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy, The University of Queensland ²Clinical Consultant, Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy, Curtin University of Technology

The first Editorial in the *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* this year celebrated 100 years of physiotherapy education in Australia (Chipchase et al 2006). As was highlighted in this centenary Editorial, Australian physiotherapy has been privileged throughout the profession's history to have leaders with foresight and vision at critical stages in its development. This is also true of the development of postgraduate education in physiotherapy, and at this time we can also celebrate a half century of postgraduate clinical education in Australia. The origin of this formal postgraduate education was the Certificate of Vertebral Manipulation offered initially by the South Australian Branch of the Australian Physiotherapy Association in 1965. Within the following decade there was a transfer of these programs to tertiary institutes. In 1974 the then South Australian Institute of Technology and the Western Australian Institute of Technology were the first to offer postgraduate diplomas in the field of manipulative therapy. Within the next two decades, programs grew and developed and clinical coursework masters programs in musculoskeletal/manipulative therapy were and are offered by physiotherapy schools in all states of Australia and New Zealand.

Australian physiotherapy is recognised as a world leader in musculoskeletal education and clinical research. This enviable position is the result of decades of dedicated work from many highly skilled and dedicated individuals who recognised the need for advanced postgraduate knowledge, clinical skill development, and research to further advance the profession. These programs have gained international recognition as leading postgraduate musculoskeletal physiotherapy education. Physiotherapists from across the world complete these programs each year in spite of significant personal and financial cost. Within the international scientific and clinical community there is a growing understanding that the assessment and management of musculoskeletal pain and disorders requires detailed knowledge of the interaction between anatomy, pathology, and neurophysiology, as well as of applied clinical and social sciences. This knowledge must be synthesised with an understanding of advanced clinical reasoning. Our current undergraduate programs provide an ideal platform for our postgraduate masters and clinical specialisation programs to underpin this process.

The need for higher level training and qualifications was soon recognised by the leaders in other specialty fields of physiotherapy. Postgraduate programs in areas such as sports, neurology, cardiorespiratory, paediatric, gerontology, and most recently animal physiotherapy are now available for clinicians. Thus Australian physiotherapists are in a unique position internationally with their access to higher level clinical training in their chosen field of practice.

One outcome of these postgraduate coursework programs has been the academic and clinical development to underpin subspecialisation within the enormous field of physiotherapy practice. The programs have also driven the process of clinical specialisation and consultancy formalised in the Fellowship programs of the Australian College of Physiotherapists as well as the Australian Physiotherapy Association's tiered membership model. The profession is now in the midst of another advance in its professional status and role with the move towards enhanced and extended scope practice within the public and private sectors. This will promote and demand even higher leadership and responsibilities of physiotherapists in the health care sector. Currently postgraduate curricula as well as new opportunities are being reviewed to meet the educational and practice demands of these positions. Career opportunities are therefore very strong for physiotherapists in Australia.

In the midst of this Australian professional surge it is of great concern that in recent years our clinical postgraduate masters programs, notably in the musculoskeletal field, are completed increasingly by committed international physiotherapists and by a dwindling number of Australian physiotherapists. The decline in the number of Australian clinical physiotherapists undertaking postgraduate programs in musculoskeletal physiotherapy, and the low numbers of physiotherapists undertaking the masters programs in many of the other fields of practice, has coincided with the increased fee burden on local students to complete both the postgraduate and undergraduate programs. As our profession strives for recognition as specialist practitioners from funding providers, the consumers, the medical profession, and health authorities, we run the risk of compromising our position within the marketplace to other competitors if the current trends of reduced commitment to postgraduate clinical education continue. The trend in the medical and physiotherapy professions is for advanced specialisation training in dedicated specialty areas, yet our highly acclaimed clinical masters programs across a number of States and fields of practice are at risk of becoming extinct. Clearly the profession needs to address this issue urgently. If the profession does not embrace the importance of postgraduate education and clinical specialisation we risk losing our market position and potentially compromise the ongoing development and advancement of the profession.

Universities offering these programs have some flexibility. The traditional full time one-year programs continue to be offered with the advantage that full time study allows offering students total immersion in postgraduate study and immediate integration of theory and practice. In these times when potential students have multiple commitments, these programs are also offered on a part-time basis to facilitate

participation. Many universities have taken other initiatives to have their programs offered in even more flexible ways. As well, for some of the smaller specialist fields, there are some opportunities for cross institutional enrolment where students with their primary enrolment at one institution can take a related course from a second university and have it credited to their degree program. The universities are responsive to demands and will work with the profession and all stakeholders to deliver the educational requirements for the advancement of the profession. However, there are stresses on universities to run as cost-effective institutions. If demands for programs are insufficient to cover the costs of their delivery, unfortunately the programs will be withdrawn, which will be to the detriment of advanced physiotherapy practice.

Two key changes are urgently required to redress this situation. First, the profession (as a group of individuals) needs to embrace the importance of postgraduate clinical training and specialisation. Equally, employers at all levels must become cognizant of the benefits of physiotherapists with higher level training and skills, especially in this era of enhanced and extended scope practice. Clinicians themselves must fully appreciate the benefits of postgraduate education. These benefits include acquiring advanced diagnostic and management skills, improved patient outcomes, professional development, career planning, and enhanced job satisfaction. Second, physiotherapists who complete postgraduate clinical education must be remunerated appropriately in recognition of their advanced training and expertise and to offset the

financial burden of this process. The tiered career system within the National Health System in the United Kingdom, together with its financial infrastructure, has provided incentives for increasing numbers of physiotherapists to return to undertake postgraduate coursework and research higher degrees. Similar processes must be in place and achievable across both the public and private sectors for physiotherapists in Australia. In tandem with these key issues, all corporate stakeholders in both the private and public sectors who benefit from the advanced skills of the graduates of postgraduate programs should consider an investment in their own and these physiotherapists' future. The most tangible investment is through financial assistance to postgraduate students through either a scholarship system or other mechanism to help defray the immediate costs of postgraduate education and subsistence.

Australia has a proud history of excellence in physiotherapy clinical practice, research, and education. There is a need for the profession to consider seriously the future of its postgraduate clinical education programs in the tertiary sector. A vibrant culture of education will ensure that Australian physiotherapy continues as a world leader in the profession.

Reference

Chipchase LS, Galley P, Jull G, McMeeken J, Refshauge K, Naylor M and Wright A (2006): Looking back at 100 years of physiotherapy education in Australia. *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* 52: 3–7.