



A Day in the Life of a Physical Therapist



By Deirdre O'Sullivan-Drombolis, BScPT, MCISc (Wound Healing)

Patients with wounds—chronic wounds in particular—often have significant difficulties with movement and the ability to perform functional activities. Many of the impairments that are underlying causes of wounds actually contribute to those mobility difficulties, including muscle weakness, decreased range of motion, decreased sensation, poor balance and pain. For these reasons, patients with wounds have the right to a skilled and knowledgeable multidisciplinary team that includes a physical therapist.

Though one doesn't typically think about a physical therapist when thinking about wounds, wound care is well within the physical therapist's scope of practice. In Canadian provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec, physical therapists have long provided direct wound care, while changes in HPRAC legislation in Ontario

have recently given physical therapists the authority to provide direct wound care. All physical therapists have the required skills necessary to treat the underlying impairments that affect patients with both acute and chronic wounds.

A Typical Day

I don't only treat patients with wounds, but I do spend a large portion of my day working with an interdisciplinary team to help those who are affected by wounds. My day typically starts with rounds to see which inpatients I need to see. I also have a small outpatient clinic. I do comprehensive assessments to identify patient-centred concerns, underlying causes of the wounds and local wound care needs. Based on these assessments and in collaboration with the team—the patient, physicians, nurses, occupational therapist, dietitian and others

The Road to Wound Care

When I first graduated from the University of Western Ontario as a physical therapist, I never dreamed that I would be working in wound care. After working at our local hospital as both an inpatient and outpatient therapist and taking some additional university courses, I began to notice the number of patients with wounds and the terrible cost to their quality of life. I was also shocked to see that very few of these patients were treated using best practices or even some of the basic evidence-based treatments I had learned about, such as compression therapy, total contact casting and therapeutic modalities. This prompted me to join the University of Western Ontario's inaugural Master of Clinical Science: Wound Healing class, which started my career in wound care.



as required—I develop a treatment plan and goals. I participate in treatments that involve both direct wound care, such as dressing changes, debridement and use of therapeutic modalities to promote wound healing—as well as those that don’t, such as exercise prescription to increase strength and range of motion and improve endurance, mobilization, use and prescription of equipment such as gait aides or offloading devices, transfer practice and treatments to help with edema and pain. I also educate patients. I continually reassess my patients to ensure that the proposed treatment programs are effective. I’m involved in their discharge planning as well.

Beyond Patient Care

My role in wound care doesn’t stop with direct patient care. I believe strongly in advocating for patients with wounds to have access to a skilled, knowledgeable team that practises evidenced-based management. I belong to various committees and associations, both locally and nationally, that are focused on improving the quality of wound care for patients. Recently, I have been working with my management to develop policies and procedures surrounding wound care. Educating staff here at the hospital and health-care professionals nationwide is my favourite part of my job.

My work is rewarding and fun. I get to spend time truly getting to know patients and help them bring about positive changes in their lives. I also work to help my fellow health-care professionals treat their patients effectively and with confidence.

While not all physical therapists have a special interest in wound care like I do, all physical therapists have the necessary training to help patients with wounds by treating many of the impairments that must be addressed every day. 🍷

Are you a PT interested in wound care?

Contact Deirdre for more information on the Canadian Physical Therapist Wound Care Collaborative, at cptwcc@gmail.com.

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Top Seven Reasons to Refer to a PT

1. Calf-muscle-pump retraining
2. Gait training and gait aid prescription
3. Safe exercise prescription, including cardiovascular, strengthening and endurance for people with compromised heart or lung function or those with impaired limb circulation
4. Offloading and pressure redistribution for those with mobility restrictions or who use a wheelchair
5. Treatment of pain
6. Edema management
7. Stimulation of healing using therapeutic modalities (e.g., electrical stimulation therapy, ultrasound, ultraviolet light)