

Physical Therapists Help Shape National Falls Prevention Policy

Spurred by the growing number of older adult falls and fall related injuries and deaths, seven physical therapists representing various practice constituencies were invited to participate in a U.S. Centers for Disease Control/National Center for Injury Prevention and Control¹ (NCIPC) Fall Prevention Experts' Panel in Atlanta. The meeting was held in December 2010.

Along with physician practices, occupational therapists, researchers, health plans, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), other CDC Centers, and the aging services network, participants explored both the opportunities and challenges of disseminating evidence-based practices in falls prevention.

NCIPC hosted the Experts' Panel to solidify partnerships, stimulate dialogue, and promote the broader dissemination of three evidence-based community falls prevention programs—Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance, Stepping On, and Otago. NCIPC has recognized these three programs in its *Preventing Falls: What Works. A CDC Compendium of Effective Community-based Interventions from Around the World.*²

More importantly, NCIPC was seeking recommendations on how to best integrate evidence-based models with a community practice model, such as the Connecticut Collaboration for Fall Prevention Program.³ NCIPC will use feedback from the two days of group discussion, presentations, and spirited interaction to develop an action plan with clear, immediate strategies and steps for stakeholder groups.

Key Recommendations

Panel members noted a lengthy list of barriers to dissemination, including lack of program awareness, little understanding of the aging services network, and a shortage of funding. They also noted how current activities and policy opportunities could be leveraged to advance this agenda.

¹ More information is available online at: <http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalsafety/falls/index.html>.

² This resource is available online at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/preventingfalls/>.

³ For more information on this program go online to <http://www.innovations.ahrq.gov/content.aspx?id=2207>.

Participants discussed several recommendations, including identifying best practices that already demonstrate linkages between health care and community programs, and developing tools and resources to support broader dissemination.

Another important recommendation was educating health care providers about the aging services network and how the estimated 29,000 community-based organizations providing older adult programs and services can facilitate more integrated and comprehensive falls prevention activities.⁴ The importance of physical therapy as both a gatekeeper to community programs and as a provider of programs (such as Otago and Stepping On) also was discussed. Key recommendations included seeking to strengthen linkages between physical therapy practice and effective community programs.

In addition to offering recommendations, the action plan will serve an advocacy function to bring greater awareness to this growing public health issue and promote policies and funding strategies that will advance the practice of evidence-based falls prevention in communities across the country.

The American Geriatrics Society/British Geriatrics Society joint Clinical Practice Guideline, *Prevention of Falls in Older Persons*⁵, published in December 2010 and the more recent U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Agency for Health Care Research and Quality) report, *Primary Care—Relevant Interventions to Prevent Falling in Older Adults: A Systematic Evidence Review for the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force*⁶, both underscore the evidence for clinical assessment, physical therapy interventions, and community programs—giving further impetus to the NCIPC initiative. The new National Prevention Strategy⁷ put forth by the US Surgeon General and a broad-based federal prevention council further underscoring the need for national attention to this issue.

Action in the States

A key to dissemination is the active participation of the State Coalitions on Fall Prevention Workgroup⁸, a peer network of 38 states facilitated by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) as

⁴ The Health Policy Forum provides an excellent overview titled *Older American's Act of 1965* written by Carol V. O'Shaughnessy; available online: <http://www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2626>.

⁵ Available online:

www.americangeriatrics.org/health_care_professionals/clinical_practice/clinical_guidelines_recommendations/2010/.

⁶ Available online: <http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf11/fallsprevention/fallsprevart.htm>.

⁷ Available online: <http://www.healthcare.gov/center/councils/nphpphc>

⁸ Available online: <http://www.healthagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=113&ElementID=746>.

part of the National Falls Free[®] Initiative.⁹ The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) is an active member of the National Falls Free[®] Coalition, joining 70 other organizational members in addressing the growing number of injurious and fatal falls among older adults.

Physical therapists have been very active in their state coalitions, working collaboratively with public health, aging services, and health care providers to bring evidence-based solutions to bear. The National Falls Free[®] Initiative is led by Lynn Beattie, PT, MPT, MHA, Vice President, Injury Prevention, NCOA, who represented national and state constituencies at the meeting. In many states, the state physical therapy chapter is an active partner seeking to bring awareness and training to members.

In Montana, Dr. Mindy Oxman Renfro, PT, GCS, served as the co-lead and founding member of the Montana Fall Prevention Coalition, which helped to bring Stepping On into local communities. Renfro recently relocated to Nevada as an Assistant Professor at Touro University, Nevada School of Physical Therapy, where she is forming a Nevada Fall Prevention Coalition. She was invited to participate in the Experts' Panel meeting.

In North Carolina, two physical therapists also holding academic positions are working in different ways to promote falls prevention in collaboration with the North Carolina Fall Prevention Coalition. Leslie Allison, PhD, PT, Assistant Professor, East Carolina University, in collaboration with her colleague Jane Painter, EdD, FAOTA, OTR/L, an ECU Occupational Therapy faculty member, has been working to promote training of local community health care providers, emergency room staff, and others in the delivery of evidence-based screening and appropriate referral. Allison also is frequently found presenting continuing education courses on falls prevention to therapists.

Tiffany Shubert, PT, PhD, Research Scientist at the UNC Center for Health and Aging, developed and is presenting a falls prevention curriculum for geriatric residents at the UNC School of Medicine. She has co-located a physical therapy clinic within a senior center to bring falls prevention screening and balance to older adults and has developed, tested, and disseminated a best-practice falls prevention exercise program at five senior centers in North Carolina. Both Allison and Shubert

⁹ Available online: <http://www.healthyagingprograms.com/content.asp?sectionid=69&ElementID=847>.

participated in the Experts' Panel. Shubert also presented a framework for integration of clinical and community services to create a continuum of falls prevention.

In Wisconsin, members of the Wisconsin Fall Prevention Coalition are building strong programmatic infrastructure and technical assistance. Terry Shea, PT, GCS, NCS, a senior physical therapist in outpatient neuro-rehabilitation at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics, has been collaborating closely with NCIPC in her efforts to translate the New Zealand Otago Program, delivered by physical therapists, to a U.S. venue in a ready-for-dissemination format. Shea is also a co-investigator on a four-year, NCIPC-funded grant on translating Stepping On for national dissemination. She specializes in vestibular and balance rehabilitation, is a member of the multidisciplinary Geriatrics Falls Clinic, and is a strong force in the Falls Free[®] Coalition. She brought a wealth of experience to the Experts' Panel discussions.

The New York Fall Prevention Coalition is strengthened by an NCIPC-funded pilot of Stepping On and Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance. NCIPC is using this two-year experience—as well as funding a small pilot in California and providing support to Oregon and Wisconsin—to develop and test program dissemination resources to hone its efforts. New York is further strengthened by the investment of the Western and Central New York Health Foundation, which is working to advance falls prevention in its service areas. Physical therapists are very active in the work of the foundation.¹⁰ In addition, both the APTA Geriatric Section and the New York Fall Prevention Coalition are fortified by home care activities and the work of Judy Daniels, MSPT, GCS, Therapeutic Services Program Manager at HCR Homecare, who represented the home health constituency on the Experts' Panel.

APTA itself was well represented on the Experts' Panel by Nate Thomas, PT, DPT, MBA, Associate Director, Federal Government Affairs, who also represents the practice and reimbursement of physical therapy services on the National Falls Free[®] Coalition. Most of the attending therapists are also active members of the Geriatrics and Balance Sections of APTA, representing clinical practice in a variety of venues.

¹⁰ More information about the Western and Central New York Health Foundation can be found online: <http://www.chfwcnny.org/Tools/Broadcaster/frontend/item.asp?ItemID=13>.

Priti Shah, PT, MPH, Aging Services Program Specialist, U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA), represented the aging services network. The AoA has a long history of promoting evidence-based health promotion programs through those community-based organizations providing older adult programs and services. This includes falls prevention programs such as Stepping On and Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance and the fear-of-falling program A Matter of Balance.¹¹

The Role of Medicare Policy

Prior to the Fall Prevention Experts' Panel, Thomas, Shah, Beattie, and others participated in a September working meeting of the joint American Occupational Therapy Association(AOTA)/NCIPC discussion of AOTA's *Analysis of Medicare Policy in Relation to Preventing Falls among Older Adults*.¹² The report outlines issues and recommendations for enhancing reimbursement for clinical interventions to prevent falls.

AOTA identified the influence of Medicare policy on practitioners who address falls risk, analyzed these policies, and identified potential areas for policy enhancement or change. Researchers conducted comprehensive interviews with individuals representing federal government agencies, providers, and nonprofit organizations concerned with falls prevention in the elderly. As the primary payer for health care for older adults, Medicare bears the greatest share of financial costs and wields the greatest influence on health care services directed toward preventing falls. As both a payer and regulator, Medicare policy can require, permit, incentivize, or prohibit provider actions related to falls prevention. Other federal and state policies, such as Medicaid, also have influence, as do issues such as care coordination, community program accessibility, and research. AOTA and APTA are working collaboratively to address key identified barriers to timely care and reimbursement. In addition, the Falls Free[®] Advocacy Workgroup is exploring opportunities to strengthen services and reimbursement within the new Affordable Care Act and the Prevention and Wellness Fund.

The AOTA study spurred the work of the Palmetto GBA, a subsidiary of BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina in Columbia, SC, to clarify and strengthen reimbursement policies for home health physical therapy and falls prevention services. Palmetto GBA is committed to timely care for older adults at risk of falling and fair reimbursement for those services. Dr. Harry Feliciano, in

¹¹ More information about Maine Health's Matter of Balance Program is available online: http://www.mmc.org/mh_body.cfm?id=432.

¹² This study can be viewed online: <http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/PracticeAreas/Aging/Falls/Key/Analysis.aspx>.

collaboration with APTA and AOTA, has been championing this work, which sets a path for broader, more consistent CMS reimbursement strategies. Dr. Feliciano collaborated with Terry Shea in developing two illustrative case studies to serve as reimbursement models for clinicians. Dr. Feliciano as well as AOTA representatives also participated on the CDC/NCIPC Experts' Panel.

Physical Therapists at Work

National, state, and local activities are underway to bring evidence-based programs and services to communities across the country, helping to promote safe aging and older adult engagement to stem the growing number of falls and fall-related injuries and deaths. Individuals aged 65+ are important resources—acting as caregivers, grandparents, volunteers, and community leaders and stewards. In these economic times, we need to preserve these resources while reducing the growing costs of injurious falls. A single hip fracture can adversely affect not only the individual, but also families, employers, and entire communities.

There is a clear need to integrate health care and aging services initiatives, promote best practices, and facilitate behavior and practice change for all stakeholders. The premise of the Falls Free[®] Initiative is that within one's own sphere of influence, everyone in a community can make a contribution to reducing the growing number of injurious and fatal falls.

Physical therapists can make a difference through clinical practice, promoting the issue with colleagues and patients, learning more about the aging services network and how its programs and services can augment or supplement treatment plans, and participating in state coalitions.

Following the panel meeting, therapists formed a working group to continue to promote the important role Physical Therapy can play in addressing this growing public health issue. Subject areas of ongoing interest to this working group include promoting standardized falls prevention education and practice competencies, identifying best practices of engagement between PT practice and aging, and bringing national attention to growing opportunities for PT practice in addressing this growing public health issue.

We invite readers to look for future articles in this journal and PT in Motion reflecting effective strategies for collaborating with the aging services network, using an algorithm for referring your falls

clients to evidence-based programs, and discovering work to prepare the New Zealand falls prevention program Otago for broader dissemination.

Panel participants and how to contact them

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