

President's Message

Francisco Maia, PT, DPT, CCRT

I wanted to start this letter by sending a big thank you to all of you who attended CSM 2021! Of course, I missed the networking component and getting to meet hundreds of physical therapists and students interested in the field of animal physical therapy, but we had a great turnout for our virtual sessions. I am very much looking forward to seeing you all next year in San Antonio, Texas.

With that in mind, I was reflecting on previous CSM conferences and thinking about what were the most common questions I would get about our field. One of them was always regarding legislation and our ability to practice with animals in certain states. There are 50 different answers to that question based on where you live in the United States, but I was glad to have Kirk Peck submit the article for this month's newsletter highlighting some of those states along with updates on legislation and guidance on what to do if you wish to initiate changes in your state. If I may be blunt, change never happens unless we are willing to fight for them. If you live in a state where animal physical therapy is a "gray area", then I would highly encourage you to get involved in making that change instead of waiting for the change to happen. Someone needs to get that started, so why not you? If needed, reach out to the Animal Physical Therapy SIG and we will provide you with support and resources.

The second question I would commonly get would be regarding what to do to prepare to be an animal physical therapist when that person would know they were years away from even going through the certification courses. Of course, that was often asked by students, but it was always a common question among practicing clinicians as well since the coursework can take months, and sometimes even over a year, to get completed. There were always 2 main things that I would recommend to anyone in that position:

1. Start spending some time learning about animal behavior and body language. Yes, animals do communicate with us, but they do so in a different way, and often physical therapists struggle initially to understand how to communicate with them. There are numerous courses, textbooks, and other resources on this topic. I would also highly recommend learning about positive reinforcement training. You will need a basic understanding to be able to develop a bond with your animal patients while getting them to do the exercises that you want them to do.
2. In addition to learning about behavior and body language, make sure you are spending some time getting used to handling animals of all shapes and sizes. We are often comfortable with handling our pets, but how about an animal who might be anxious, nervous, or has behavioral issues? How about an animal that does not know you and has had numerous veterinary visits that were not pleasant to them? While I was getting certified as a canine rehabilitation therapist, I spent 2-3 hours a week volunteering as a dog walker at a local dog shelter. This was a win-win because those pups got the tender loving care they needed and I got experience handling dogs of all different shapes and sizes.

*Thank you,
francisco@thek9pt.com*

The Legalese of Animal Physical Therapy

Kirk Peck, PT, PhD, CSCS, CCRT, CERP

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I would like to share a brief scenario many of you probably can relate to as part of your career path in physical therapy. You graduated from physical therapy school, acquired a few good years of clinical practice, and eventually decided you would like to get certified in animal physical therapy as a way to satisfy a personal desire to treat our wonderful human companions. To achieve this goal, you enrolled in a certification program for animal rehabilitation, got super excited about collaborating with both physical therapist colleagues and veterinarians in the same learning environment, and finally you successfully passed all required examinations. Then you returned to your home state and realized no laws allow physical therapists to legally treat animals.

I share this scenario only because I have heard the story too many times over to remember. As past president of the APTSIG I received numerous questions from physical therapists, both pre- and post-certification in animal rehabilitation inquiring if their state laws allowed physical therapists to treat animals. One of my standard replies was for the inquirer to seek direct advice from their own state's physical therapy licensure Board as the appropriate entity for regulatory interpretation. After 6 years of repeating myself, I decided it was time to speak in a more public venue with a targeted audience representing all state regulatory agencies--the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy (FSBPT).

During the annual FSBPT fall meeting in 2019, I presented the current state of regulation guiding the practice of animal physical therapy in the United States. The presentation was summarized into an article published online in the FSBPT Forum in 2020. The article is entitled, **"A Political Dog and Pony Show: Policy Making in Support of Animal Physical Therapy"** and may be accessed at:

<https://www.fsbpt.org/Free-Resources/FSBPT-Forum/Forum-2020/A-Political-Dog-and-Pony-Show>

I encourage any physical therapist with an interest in treating animals as part of physical therapist practice to read the article posted on the FSBPT website. The narrative covers a brief history of animal physical therapy, in addition to current state laws and regulations, sample barriers to practice, and suggested negotiations to support regulation for physical therapists seeking to collaborate with veterinarians. It is imperative that physical therapists learn about appropriate state laws regarding animal practice, and do so "before" making a substantial financial commitment to an educational endeavor that may lead to personal frustration when they learn they cannot legally treat animals in their state.

Finally, it is worth restating the current position of the American Physical Therapy Association on physical therapists treating animals. In 2018, the APTA House of Delegates unanimously passed the following position statement:

RC 26-18 AMEND: VETERINARIANS: COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS (HOD P06-03-23-20) COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PHYSICAL THERAPISTS AND VETERINARIANS

“The American Physical Therapy Association supports the collaborative relationships of physical therapists and veterinarians and the evolution of specialized practice by physical therapists who are addressing the rehabilitation needs of animals. Where allowable by state law and regulation, and consistent with a physical therapist’s knowledge and skills, physical therapists may establish collaborative, collegial relationships with veterinarians for the purposes of providing professional consultation and expertise in movement impairment, fitness, and conditioning for animals”.

This particular APTA Position is important for the practice of animal physical therapy in that it serves as an excellent reference for political advocacy and educating other physical therapists and veterinarians who may be unaware of this unique niche practice. Support from the APTA in addition to an active Special Interest Group through the Academy of Orthopaedic Physical Therapy serve as excellent resources for physical therapists with interests in the field.

Treating animals as part of clinical practice can be very gratifying and an excellent way to highlight the value physical therapy adds to the physical therapist and veterinary team in restoring physical well-being to animals of all kind. However, physical therapists need astute knowledge of their respective state laws to ensure they have legal ground to expand their services beyond just human care. So again, if you are serious about pursuing animal physical therapy as a practice option, I urge you to please read the comprehensive article on the FSBPT website. It addresses several important topics that all physical therapists should know if treating animals is a career goal.

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