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I am writing in response to the ongoing consultation for the development of a new Aged Care Act. I would like to draw particular attention to the vital importance of allied health services, specifically physiotherapy, in achieving positive health outcomes and managing healthcare costs in the aged care sector.

Incorporating structured, regular, and adequately funded physiotherapy services in the aged care framework is not just a matter of enhancing quality of life for the elderly but also a cost-saving strategy for the healthcare system in the long term. The role of physiotherapy in aged care should be viewed as integral to the overall health strategy, rather than an optional service. Below, I provide a detailed explanation of why the provision of physiotherapy is crucial for the aged care sector, supported by evidence and examples.

1. Physiotherapy and Improved Health Outcomes in Aged Care

The elderly population, particularly those in residential aged care facilities (RACFs), experience a range of health issues that impact their mobility, function, and overall quality of life. Physiotherapy plays a significant role in addressing these challenges and ensuring better health outcomes.

Key Benefits of Physiotherapy:

Falls Prevention: Falls are a leading cause of injury, hospitalization, and even death among the elderly. A targeted physiotherapy program can assess fall risks and design interventions, such as balance training, muscle strengthening, and gait training. According to research, structured exercise programs reduce the risk of falls by 23% in older adults. Preventing falls not only reduces the incidence of fractures and other serious injuries but also mitigates long-term disability, dependency, and the need for more intensive care.

Chronic Pain Management: Physiotherapy interventions, such as manual therapy, exercise programs, and hydrotherapy, are effective non-pharmacological approaches to managing chronic pain conditions like osteoarthritis, lower back pain, and rheumatoid arthritis. These treatments help reduce reliance on medications, particularly opioids, and prevent associated risks such as addiction and side effects, which are particularly problematic in aged care settings.

Maintenance of Functional Independence: Regular physiotherapy interventions enable older adults to maintain their independence by improving mobility, strength, and endurance. This not only allows residents to perform daily activities such as dressing, walking, and bathing but also reduces the burden on caregivers and nursing staff. Early and consistent physiotherapy interventions delay the decline into higher care needs, allowing residents to remain in lower-cost, lower-intensity care environments.

Time Allocation for Physiotherapy:

Currently, there is a large disparity in the allocation of physiotherapy time compared to the total care provided. A minimum of 40 minutes per resident per week of physiotherapy is essential to ensure meaningful outcomes. This amount is particularly small when compared to the 200 minutes of overall care per day that are allocated in many aged care facilities. Despite this, the physiotherapy component remains a critical aspect of care, with significant benefits that can prevent further medical complications and reduce the need for high-intensity care.

2. Physiotherapy Reduces Health Care Costs

In addition to improving health outcomes, physiotherapy can significantly contribute to reducing the

overall cost burden on the aged care and broader healthcare system. Below are some examples of how allied health services, particularly physiotherapy, can help reduce costs:

Reducing Hospital Admissions and Re-Admissions: Preventing falls and managing chronic conditions through physiotherapy reduces the need for hospital admissions and emergency room visits. Falls that lead to hospital stays can be costly. For example, a single hip fracture can lead to surgical interventions, extended hospital stays, rehabilitation, and possibly permanent relocation to high-level care. Effective physiotherapy reduces the risk of such high-cost incidents.

Minimizing the Need for High-Intensity Care: When elderly residents lose their mobility or become more dependent, they often require high-intensity and high-cost care services. By maintaining functional independence through physiotherapy, aged care residents can continue to manage many aspects of their personal care with minimal assistance, thereby reducing the need for more expensive 24-hour care.

Non-Pharmacological Pain Management: With the current over-reliance on pain medications, especially opioids, within the aged care system, physiotherapy provides a viable alternative. Managing pain through physical therapies can lead to better long-term outcomes, reducing medication costs and the risk of complications such as adverse drug reactions and hospitalizations.

3. Physiotherapy Addresses the Unique Needs of the Elderly Population

Elderly individuals in aged care settings often present with complex health conditions that require specialized care. Physiotherapy can provide targeted interventions that meet these unique needs.

Rehabilitation After Illness or Surgery: Many aged care residents experience significant declines in mobility and function following surgeries, strokes, or other medical events. Physiotherapists can design rehabilitation programs that help restore function and mobility, allowing residents to regain independence more quickly. This not only improves the resident's quality of life but also decreases the amount of care required from nursing staff, freeing resources for other patients.

Cognitive Decline and Dementia Care: Physiotherapists play a key role in managing dementia and cognitive decline in aged care. Regular physical activity has been shown to slow cognitive decline in elderly individuals, while structured exercise programs can reduce agitation and wandering in dementia patients. These programs reduce the need for pharmacological interventions and help maintain a calming environment within care facilities.

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5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The inclusion of physiotherapy and other allied health services in aged care is not just beneficial but

critical. From reducing falls and hospital admissions to managing chronic pain and maintaining independence, physiotherapy directly contributes to both better health outcomes and cost savings. We strongly recommend the following actions in the new Aged Care Act:

Recognize physiotherapy as an essential service in aged care, with appropriate funding mechanisms to ensure its availability across all facilities.

Mandate minimum standards for physiotherapy care in aged care, including regular assessments, tailored interventions, and ongoing monitoring of mobility and function.

Incorporate allied health professionals in care planning to ensure a holistic approach to care that includes not only medical treatments but also physical, emotional, and functional well-being.

Physiotherapy is more than just a support service; it is a cornerstone of aged care that enhances quality of life, promotes independence, and reduces the overall burden on the healthcare system.

Thank you for considering these points in your consultation. We look forward to working together to build an aged care system that values and integrates the role of allied health professionals in supporting the well-being of our elderly population.