THE GERONTOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES FOR ACCREDITED DOCTORATE PHYSICAL THERAPY PROGRAMS

The United States Census Bureau reported an aging population of 55.8 million, which is approximately 17% of the population, according to the 2020 Census (Caplan, 2023). By 2050, the global population aged 60 years and older will double to 2.1 billion (World Health Organization, 2024). With approximately 55% of physical therapy users aged 65 and older (Zauderer, 2024), it is imperative for physical therapy programs to integrate geriatric-focused competencies to adequately address the needs of this demographic.

Despite the growing demand for physical therapy services among older adults, the current state of physical therapy education does not sufficiently address geriatric care. In 2019, only 1.2% of the 209,000 licensed physical therapists in the U.S. had completed the necessary training to achieve Geriatric Certified Specialist (GCS) certification (Shubert & Hengage, 2020). Additionally, while the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) accredits entry-level physical therapy programs, the organization's standards do not mandate specific competencies in gerontology or the treatment of aging populations.

The absence of geriatric-focused curricula within accredited physical therapy programs poses a significant challenge in preparing future physical therapists to meet the unique needs of older adults. Although no formal accreditation standards currently exist for geriatric care, research has identified several key areas of improvement for physical therapy education programs, including:

- Clinical and Didactic Integration: Providing students with clinical placements and coursework that focuses on geriatric care has been shown to increase the likelihood of physical therapy graduates considering geriatrics as a career path (Blackwood & Sweet, 2017).
- Core Course Offerings: The incorporation of topics such as person-centered care, anti-ageist beliefs, physical activity promotion, and evidence-based interventions is crucial to equip students with the tools to provide comprehensive care for older adults (Criss et al., 2022).
- Research on Aging and Rehabilitation: Emphasizing research on age-related health challenges, including innovative interventions, is vital for ensuring that physical therapy programs stay current with the evolving needs of the aging population (VanSwearingen, 2022).
- Integrating Geriatric Care Principles: Integrating geriatric care principles into the physical therapy curriculum to prepare students for diverse clinical experiences (Reneker et al., 2016).

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