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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Physical Therapy

Feature

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Growing up, whenever Rachel Herron, PT, DPT, walked into a clinic, she noticed everyone around her. As a woman of color, she rarely saw herself reflected in what she saw.

"I didn't see my first brown physical therapist until I got to PT school. Seeing her was like seeing a unicorn," she says. "It changes your sense of safety and comfort. If you see yourself reflected, you feel there's more of a chance you won't be harmed in the experience. Maybe they are less likely to say something offensive, even if it wasn't intentional. It makes a difference."

APTA is working to ensure that no one in the profession sees rarity in diversity. The association is building an infrastructure for sustained progress and is further increasing its efforts to educate members and encourage more DEI-focused engagement.

"People who are not minorities are getting into the fight. And though they have been in the fight for a while, there's definitely been a pivot over the last year," says Herron. She is chair of the APTA Washington Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Special Committee and co-founder of The Collective for Diversity and Social Justice, a student-founded and -led diversity group within the DPT program at Pacific University. "I've learned that some of my white peers were far more capable of being allies than I ever gave them credit for. It is so empowering. It's shifted my lens to fight for more representation in the field, and I want everyone in APTA to fight with me."

Understanding True DEI

DEI – short for diversity, equity, and inclusion – encompasses multiple broad terms. When people toss it around as a buzzword, it can be difficult to have a clear understanding of what is being addressed. Many people think of DEI dealing primarily with racial and ethnic issues, but it can be so much more than that. That's why other DEI facets – such as gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, culture, national origin, religious commitments, age, (dis)ability status, and political perspective – need to be addressed.

According to the Ford Foundation, diversity represents all the varied identities and differences among people – both collectively and as individuals.

Equity seeks to ensure fair treatment, equality of opportunity, and parity in access to information and resources.

Inclusion, drawing again upon the Ford Foundation, builds a culture of belonging by actively inviting the contribution and participation of all people. Nevertheless, it's important to note that the definitions will vary based on application. For instance, the University of Iowa defines inclusion as "a campus community where all members are and feel respected, have a sense of belonging, and are able to participate and achieve to their potential."

University of Michigan Chief Diversity Officer Robert Sellers often has emphasized the importance of considering all three topics – diversity, equity, and inclusion – which he likens to various aspects of attending a dance:

- Diversity is when everyone is invited to the party.
- Equity means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist.
- Inclusion means that everyone has the opportunity to dance.

APTA is working to be cognizant of all the different populations that are underrepresented or marginalized and is ensuring that all these populations are being included in the conversation.

Herron believes the contrast between a colorblind philosophy and recognizing differences has confused some people who've encountered DEI.

"On one side, they're saying, 'let's not notice race and treat everybody equally,' but on the other side – and that's where I operate – we need to recognize each other's differences because with those come different traumas, different lived experiences, and things we should take into consideration if we truly want to treat people holistically."

Gregory E. Hicks, PT, PhD, FAPTA, professor in the Department of Physical Therapy at the University of Delaware, knows that achieving full DEI is daunting. As a Black physical therapist, he has been discussing this topic for almost 15 years.

"DEI just didn't go anywhere until recently," Hicks says. "We still have significant disparities in our country when it comes to delivery of health care and outcomes for people who come from different backgrounds. That's what we do as physical therapists – we deliver health care. So, that should be part of our mantle, and we should make sure that's taken care of regardless of who the patient is or their background."

With APTA's vision to transform society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience, and its mission to build a community that advances the profession of physical therapy to improve the health of society, DEI measures are vital to accomplishing the goals needed to attain them.

APTA's strategic plan includes an objective to foster the long-term sustainability of the physical therapy profession by making APTA an inclusive organization that reflects the diversity of the society the profession serves.

Achieving that objective requires a transformation of the profession and the association – and it requires matching words with actions, including championing public policies that help increase awareness and drive change.

"This is not a political issue. These are human rights issues. It's important to stand in solidarity," Herron says. "The core of all DEI comes down to belonging, and with APTA speaking up for people from marginalized communities feeling alone or isolated, that is a big step forward."

Hicks served on APTA's Board of Directors, stepping in to finish the term of Sheila Nicholson, PT, DPT, JD, MBA, MA, in 2019 [Nicholson died in June that year], and got a better sense of how things are done in the association.

"During that time, I had some great conversations with folks about my desire to see things change in the landscape. One place where I would like to see change is in our accrediting body," he says. "I proposed that the Board suggest to CAPTE that they look at their standards and consider changing them. That turned to a positive direction. Now, CAPTE has pulled together a diversity taskforce and will look at that suggestion and an array of other suggestions as well. That's a positive step forward."

Steve Chesbro, PT, DPT, EdD, APTA's vice president of education, and Carmen Elliott, MS, APTA's vice president of payment and practice management, are leading APTA's efforts with an array of initiatives to improve DEI programs and practices.

For instance, they're working to improve the admissions processes by increasing diversity of the applicant pool and incoming classes to DPT and PTA education programs; to improve communications for informing APTA members of the association's DEI efforts by demonstrating the organization's commitment to DEI through action and storytelling; and to strengthen cultural competence resources for both educators and clinicians that are contemporary and specific to community need.

There's also the annual Celebration of Diversity Gala which, in line with APTA's strategic plan, is designed to significantly increase the association's Minority Scholarship Fund so that more awards in more significant amounts may be provided. APTA has provided more than \$1 million in awards thus far – and efforts to grow the fund are at an all-time high.

Making a Difference

Alexandra Hill, PT, DPT, serves as co-chair for the APTA Pelvic Health Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee. Its mission is to keep the APTA Pelvic Health Board of Directors informed of best practices as they relate to those issues in APTA pelvic health activities and events, including education, research, and conferences, and to serve as a resource for related messaging.

"Representation truly does matter on many levels, and we need to work on diversifying APTA's membership and leadership," Hill says. "This is why APTA addressing DEI is critical to the profession, its membership, our patients, and the public. It will help promote change that supports improved accessibility and opportunities for everyone, and will make sure that not only are the seats at the table diverse but also heard and affirmed."

One way Hill helps is by serving as a mentor with the Duke University Doctor of Physical Therapy Program's Summer Discovery Program, which provides an immersive experience for undergraduate students interested in physical therapy to learn more about the profession, especially those from underrepresented communities among PTs.

"Being a mentor for this program has been an amazing experience. I'm able to work with students who haven't had as much exposure to the profession or don't know anyone in physical therapy who they can really relate to," she says.

While in grad school at USC, Natalie Weeks-O'Neal, PT, DPT, was instrumental in starting a minority mentorship program, reaching out to partner with other minority physical therapists and faculty to foster a network for underrepresented students.

Weeks-O'Neal, who now works as a program director at a PT school in Las Vegas, says she is one of only a handful of Native American PTs and continues to conduct outreach for Native American and other minority youth to champion the profession and take a look at health care fields as a viable educational option.

"We recently started our first-ever national Native American/Alaska Native physical therapy program and are furthering those efforts through APTA's newly formed DEI committee," she says. "We're looking at how we can promote that vision even further for the next generation."

Howe Wang, a DPT student at Virginia Commonwealth University, has focused his efforts primarily within his academic campus, with some national involvement. He developed a program called Practice with Pride, in which self-identified LGBTQ+ health science students met with LGBTQ+ faculty and staff for conversations about being LGBTQ+ and navigating a health profession.

Additionally, Wang is on the school's Diversity in Curriculum Task Force, which is reviewing the curriculum within the College of Health Professions and recommending changes to ensure that the curriculum is being taught with a DEI lens. The task force also assists faculty in making necessary changes.

"I attended the previous two APTA Combined Sections Meetings, where I participated in the DEI-related sessions and engaged in meaningful conversations with others who are passionate about DEI," Wang says. "Most recently, I participated in APTA's Student Assembly Facebook Live, where we discussed LGBTQ+ identity and fostering allyship in DEI."

Eight years ago, Hicks launched ADAPT – an acronym for "advancing diversity in physical therapy" – at the University of Delaware focused on increasing diversity in the physical therapy program.

"The focus is to work with undergraduates and try to make sure that, from their freshman year, we are trying to make contact with kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, primarily those from racial minority groups that are underrepresented in physical therapy," he explains. "We want them to understand what they

need to do to be successful applicants for a DPT program, so we pay for tutoring services, GRE-prep courses, help with time-management assessments, and do lots of one-on-one interaction to put them on as equal a footing as possible when it's time for applying for PT school."

ADAPT has resulted in some big changes in the university's DPT program student body mix. When he started the program, approximately 5% of students were from underrepresented minority groups in physical therapy. Today, that number is over 16%, and the upcoming 2021 class is expected to be more diverse than any previous class.

Even if students wind up attending another school's DPT program, Hicks sees that as a win. He is willing to help any student regardless of whether they are considering the University of Delaware.

While working on her doctorate in physical therapy at Pacific University, Herron cofounded the program's first-ever student-led diversity group, and she and her colleagues presented at CSM last year about its impact on the community. She's also been working with the National Association of Black Physical Therapists, which provides mentorship opportunities and resources to better support students and minorities.

"It's important to recognize the progress we have made, but we need to start living that growth mindset," she says. "It's not that we haven't been doing great things to serve patients, but there's more we can be doing, and APTA seems committed to doing that."

Talina S. M. Corvus, PT, DPT, PhD, has participated in DEI efforts at the academic and state chapter levels, having led the effort to establish the Cultural and Minority Affairs Committee for APTA Oregon in 2018. Corvus is an assistant professor at Pacific University in Oregon.

"The committee, which has grown from four original members to 12 current standing members, focuses on providing education and resources to students and practitioners in Oregon, and on supporting outreach and mentorship," she says. "Within academia, I have been working to support The Collective for Diversity and Social Justice, a group within the DPT program at Pacific University that focuses on peer support and education for underrepresented groups, and on youth outreach to increase interest in the profession."

Expanding Advocacy

Justin Elliott, APTA's vice president of government affairs, highlights recent collaboration with other therapy groups on the creation and introduction of the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3637/S. 2747). The bipartisan legislation would create new grants for education programs to recruit and retain individuals who are underrepresented in the field of physical therapy, including racial and ethnic minorities, and are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The bill has passed the U.S. House and awaits action in the Senate.

"We're looking at how we can change and support public policy that will help and promote a diverse physical therapy profession and the patients we serve," he says.

For instance, in April, APTA submitted comments on HHS's proposed objectives for inclusion in Healthy People 2030. The association also signed onto an American Indians and Alaska Natives Health Partners letter to Congress on appropriations for the Indian Health Service in 2020.

There is more to advocacy than formal support of public policy efforts, however, and Herron feels that one doesn't need to be an expert to speak up for others.

"Yes, there is a time to listen and educate yourself. And yes, it is important for more of us to give the microphone to the person from that minority community and allow them to speak up if they choose to do that," she says. "It's important to talk less and listen more, but I also think many of us limit ourselves because we are fearful that we won't say things the right way. No one is an expert on this. It takes many experiences of speaking up."

Creating a More Representative Patient Experience

It has long been said that the population of those treating should resemble the population of those being treated, but in the physical therapy profession — as it is in most health professions — that is far from the case.

"Having a profession that has providers who resemble the patient population, not only in appearance but also in their cultural characteristics, is beneficial for our patients and the profession," Wang says. "It will allow the profession to continue to grow, learn, and work together to address our individual biases and to fight systemic racism, ableism, transphobia, fatphobia, and other biases, and it will give our patients a high-quality experience that will make them feel safe and understood."

Elliott agrees that the profession needs providers who better reflect America. To get there, the profession needs to open up to those who may not even be thinking about physical therapy as a career.

"When they see a PT or PTA who reflects who they are, they may think about joining the profession," Elliott says. "That helps our ability to recruit and retain more individuals who reflect the diversity of the patients we serve."

Weeks-O'Neal stresses that "representation matters," and with APTA offering a more holistic look at the population of the patients it serves — especially those who are underserved and lack access to physical therapy — taking a closer look, including outreach and creating a better environment, will do wonders for changing the profession for the better.

Hicks says the literature is strong about the existence of disparity in health care, particularly that underrepresented minorities receive a lower quality of care and have worse outcomes. He adds that the literature is clear that the way to combat that disparity is to diversify the workforce.

"The more representation you have within the workforce, the greater the chance that all patients will be seen and heard," he says. "Therapists will start to have different experiences and understand patients from a different perspective. Hopefully that will enable better interaction with all patients, and the walls that have existed for so long will start to be broken down."

Howe Wang says that for years students and professionals have been neglected by the system and don't feel supported by their programs or the profession itself. He adds that while he appreciates that APTA has been creating a DEI committee and developing scholarships, much more needs to be done.

"It is important to me that in discussions about DEI, it isn't just people of color, those who identify as LGBTQ+, or other minority populations talking among themselves. Those discussions must include those who are in positions of power. Pressure should be placed on them to make the necessary changes to

better the profession as a whole," he says.

Herron says APTA's efforts will not only change the way things are done within the PT profession but also serve as an example to other professions within health care.

"For this to be sustainable, we have to give each other grace, and give ourselves grace. When we know better we must do better," she says. "We will get further if we look at this as a continuum, as moving down the road. We must ask ourselves how we can continue to grow, and make a plan to get there."

Keith Loria is a freelance writer.

SIDEBAR

APTA Promotion of DEI at a Glance

Planning and tracking APTA's DEI initiatives is a multifaceted strategy. It involves numerous individual projects related to both operations and fundraising that will be coordinated to enhance communication and alignment between project teams, their respective goals, and, ultimately, APTA members. APTA staff have implemented project plans and strategies for reporting updates across their DEI initiatives in a format that clearly and concisely communicates the efforts. Efforts so far have resulted in the following actions:

Celebration of Diversity Gala. The traditional Celebration of Diversity Gala pivoted to a virtual event in 2020 that was held over three nights with a fundraising goal of \$10,000. It raised more than \$13,000. (See "Celebration of Diversity Gala and the Minority Scholarship Fund" on page 28.)

Member Communications. APTA hosted three virtual DEI roundtables in 2020 focused on race and racism, pipelines to becoming a PT or PTA, and pathways to leadership.

Cultural Competence Resources. Among other new resources available on APTA's website, the association has added four online cultural competence resources – on LGBTQ+, Ageism, Individuals with Disabilities, and Education. (See "APTA Expands Online DEI Content" on page 30.)

Fundraising. APTA created the Dimensions of Diversity Fund in February 2020 to augment its current Minority Scholarship Fund by rededicating and reorganizing the Physical Therapy Fund, a 503(c)3 charitable organization.

APTA will dedicate proceeds associated with its centennial year activities in 2021 and all naming rights in its new headquarters building to the Physical Therapy Fund, to benefit the Minority Scholarship Fund and the new Dimensions of Diversity Fund, through the Campaign for Future Generations. The fund had \$1.3 million as its endowment base prior to this decision. Its new goals: \$2.6 million by Dec. 31, 2021, and \$5 million by the Dec. 31, 2025. This will increase scholarship support to underrepresented minorities and individuals with disabilities five-fold in five years. (See "Campaign for Future Generations: Opportunities to Support DEI" on page 29.)

Government Affairs and Practice Management. As a member of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, APTA signed on to a letter asking the Social Security Administration to collect and regularly report data about race and ethnicity.