

The right to choose

By Meri Goehring – Chronicle columnist

If you have the misfortune to have a surgical procedure, be in an accident or suffer from a chronic condition, you may benefit from physical therapy treatments to help you get back on the road to good health. Your physician may also encourage you to see a physical therapist to help prevent health issues from developing.

When physical therapy is indicated, what do you do? How do you find a physical therapist that fits your needs?

Your physician may advise you. But in some cases, because of travel restrictions, insurance requirement, hours of operation or the level of skill required for your treatment, some physical therapy practices may not be a good choice for you. You should know that you are not necessarily bound to visit the physical therapists that are first recommended to you; you may choose any therapist you wish. Your decision should be based on the following criteria.

First, consider your specific problems that are to be addressed. Physical therapists are all licensed professionals who have completed advanced degrees from physical therapy programs accredited by the American Physical Therapy Association. All have passed a rigorous national examination and have had carefully supervised clinical experience as part of their schooling. Graduates may have either a master's degree or a doctorate in physical therapy, but they all have to pass the same test and exhibit the same clinical competency regardless of their degree.

In addition, there are 10 areas of postgraduate certification, such as neurology, geriatrics, sports medicine and orthopedics that confer specialization in their field. These require additional studies and examinations and must be renewed periodically. Physical therapists in most states are also required to obtain ongoing education credits to remain current with developments and retain their license to practice.

If your problem is specific, you may wish to choose your therapy accordingly. For example, if your problems relate to the aging process, you may benefit from seeing a therapist certified in geriatrics. If your problem is nerve-related, look for a therapist with a neurological specialty. On the other hand, you may not need a specialist, and just about any physical therapist will be able to fill your needs.

How do you select a PT? Certainly you can ask your friends and acquaintances or make some phone calls to local clinics. The American Physical Therapy Association has an excellent Web site at <http://www.apta.org> that has a page called "Find a PT." You can type in your location and needs, and the site will give you a list of licensed therapists in your area that meet those needs.

As part of selecting a therapist, the facility in which you will receive your treatment must be considered as well. Is it convenient for you to get there? Some patients cannot ride long distances in a car, so this could be an issue. If traveling is a problem, home health care is also available, so check on that with your physician. Does the physical therapy clinic offer treatments at the hours you can be there? Will you see the same therapist each visit, or will you see a different one each time? Seeing the same therapist on each visit ensures continuity and an accurate assessment of progress. Also, make certain the therapist will be spending an adequate amount of time with you during your visit.

The facility should have the necessary equipment to treat you. If you need aquatic therapy, the facility will have to have a pool, obviously. Whirlpool treatments require a whirlpool tub. You get the idea. Be sure to ask your physician or therapist what you will need and check with the clinic to make sure it can be provided. If you belong to an HMO, make certain the facility you choose is on the list of providers.

Carefully choose your physical therapist, as you would your physician. Remember, you can go anywhere you like, and, just as with your physician, you can change therapists anytime if you have concerns or reservations about the treatments you are getting. Ultimately, you are responsible for your health care.

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