

Five things about... hand therapy

Looking to differentiate your physiotherapy practice but are unsure how to go about it? Hand therapy could be the answer writes physiotherapist and hand therapist Karen Fitt, APAM, the president of the Australian Hand Therapy Association.



Hand therapy is in demand

As a specialised field, hand therapy focuses on the rehabilitation of the upper limb, from shoulder to hand. It involves the evaluation and testing of the injured limb and the design of specific devices and programs to return the limb to its highest level of function.

Most hand therapists provide a suite of interventions such as diagnosis of musculoskeletal injuries and conditions and post-surgical rehabilitation. They can cover a wide range of upper extremity disorders ranging from simple fingertip injuries to complex surgical recovery.

Yet, despite the complex nature of this work, hand therapy is often overlooked in traditional physiotherapy training. This has resulted in a high demand for qualified hand therapists within Australia and overseas. Add to this a growing awareness of the field among the general population, and it's easy to understand how the demand for hand therapists outweighs the supply.



It's a truly multidisciplinary field

One of the great things about hand therapy is that it's a multidisciplinary field. Just as most hand surgery teams are made up of orthopaedic and plastic surgeons, it's common to find registered physiotherapists and occupational therapists working together as part of a hand therapy team.

On any given day, a hand therapist will utilise a variety of

techniques and tools to return an injured hand, arm or shoulder to its optimal function. These may include the design of custom splints, activity and exercise programs, pain and wound management, and scar care. Some hand therapists also work as consultants in industries where they train managers and employees in healthy work habits and return-to-work activities.

3 There's never been a better time to get involved

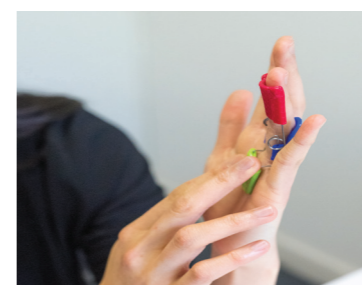


Hand therapy is an exciting area and there's never been a better time to get involved. World-leading orthopaedic surgeons such as Marc Garcia-Elias and Elisabet Hagert are producing outstanding research into proprioception and sensorimotor control of the wrist. In turn, they are inspiring others to learn from their developments. Hand therapists are needed to work alongside progressive surgeons to help patients through their recovery and rehabilitation stages.

Patients with chronic conditions, such as arthritis, are also benefiting from hand therapy. By working closely with skilled hand therapists, patients are able to learn about issues such as joint protection and energy conservation. They can also benefit from specialised adaptive equipment and devices, which can improve limb function.

4 It's personally rewarding

Hand therapy is without doubt one of the most personally rewarding fields of physiotherapy. Many people don't fully appreciate just how difficult life can be without two functioning hands. Many careers rely upon correct hand and arm function and for thousands of people, their hands are their life. It is rewarding knowing that you have helped a musician or a manual labourer return to their work or passion; the gratitude received from patients is truly humbling.



5 You'll learn unique treatment skills

Hand therapists regularly utilise treatment skills that are often not taught within typical physiotherapy training. On any given day, a hand therapist can be involved in the design and manufacture of individualised, custom-made splints. These may be made from materials such as thermoplastic, leather or neoprene, and are specifically designed for each patient. Acquiring these unique skills is an excellent way to set yourself apart from everyday practitioners, and it adds a further skillset to your practice.

GET INVOLVED

Karen Fitt has been practising as a hand therapist for 20 years. Her passion for her work derives from it being an interesting and rapidly advancing field.

'Hand therapy and hand surgery are always developing, so there's always something new to learn,' she says. 'The work is rewarding and diverse, and it makes an enormous difference to the lives that it touches.'

According to Karen, hand therapists are in high demand within Australia and overseas, and there are many opportunities available, including 'research and volunteering for outreach work in developing countries.'

If you are interested in pursuing hand therapy as part of your physiotherapy practice, both the APA and Australian Hand Therapy Association run accredited courses.

Karen is co-presenter of the 'Assessment and management of the wrist' course in September. Visit the APA website for details.

The APA is investigating a working relationship with AHTA that may provide APA members with opportunities to attend AHTA courses.