

Virginia Board of Physical Therapy

Guidance on Diagnostic Imaging Referrals by Physical Therapists

The Virginia Board of Physical Therapy (Board) recently received a request for further guidance regarding the ability of a Virginia licensed physical therapist to refer patients for diagnostic imaging studies.

Based upon a review of the relevant provisions of the *Virginia Code* and the Board's Regulations Governing the Practice of Physical Therapy, the Board opines that there are no provisions that would prohibit a Virginia licensed physical therapist from referring a patient to an appropriate practitioner for diagnostic imaging studies. The Board's analysis of the relevant provisions related to scope of practice and referrals is set forth below.

Scope of Practice

The current scope of practice for physical therapy appears in Virginia Code [§ 54.1-3473](#):

"Practice of physical therapy" means that branch of the healing arts that is concerned with, upon medical referral and direction, the evaluation, testing, treatment, reeducation and rehabilitation by physical, mechanical or electronic measures and procedures of individuals who, because of trauma, disease or birth defect, present physical and emotional disorders. The practice of physical therapy also includes the administration, interpretation, documentation, and evaluation of tests and measurements of bodily functions and structures within the scope of practice of the physical therapist. However, the practice of physical therapy does not include the medical diagnosis of disease or injury, the use of Roentgen rays and radium for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes or the use of electricity for shock therapy and surgical purposes including cauterization.

A physical therapist's scope of practice explicitly excludes the *use* of "Roentgen rays" or x-rays for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes. Further excluded is the *use* of "radium" for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes, which can be interpreted to encompass CT and PET scans and nuclear medicine imaging. The Board notes that the reference to "use" contemplates the actual use of the equipment by a practitioner for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes, rather than referral of a patient for imaging studies based upon these specified modalities. Further, the scope definition is silent on the *use* of other imaging modalities that apply magnetic fields, radio waves, or sound waves instead of radiation such as MRI and ultrasound.

Regardless of modality, the scope of practice does not permit a physical therapist to medically diagnose disease or injury.

Duty to Refer

At the time of evaluation or treatment, where a patient's medical condition is determined to be beyond the physical therapist's scope of practice, the physical therapist is required to

immediately refer such patient to an appropriate practitioner who is either a licensed doctor of medicine, osteopathy, chiropractic, podiatry, or dental surgery, or a licensed advanced practice registered nurse practicing in accordance with the provisions of [§ 54.1-2957](#). See Va. Code [§ 54.1-3482](#) (E). Where a physical therapist determines that further medical diagnosis of disease or injury through imaging studies is warranted, the physical therapist may refer a patient to a radiologist, as a licensed doctor of medicine or osteopathy, as an appropriate practitioner.

The Board notes that the above analysis relates to the Board's jurisdiction over the practice of physical therapy. The Board does not and cannot opine regarding the applicability of laws or regulations that relate to the practice of medicine or radiology or to the receipt of referrals for diagnostic imaging.