

Clinical Decision Making for the Physical Therapist Assistant

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Dedication

This text is dedicated to the memory of Emma Jean Beverly, a dedicated wife, loving mother, doting grandmother, and great mother-in-law.

—SBS

To my greatest fan, Bob. Thank you for all your encouragement and support. All my love.

—Christina

To my Emily. Always reach for the stars and enjoy what you do. Love always.

—Mommy

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Preface

It is difficult to count the number of clinical decisions physical therapist assistants (PTAs) make on a daily basis. Each clinical decision impacts the effectiveness of the physical therapy treatment and ultimately the patient's response to that treatment. Although physical therapists evaluate patients, design treatment plans, and may carry out most of the therapeutic plan, PTAs are expected to make decisions based on and within the scope of the plan of care entrusted to them. PTAs may make the following clinical decisions: resistive exercise dosage, determining the amount of assistance a patient needs during ambulation, or deciding the most effective way to communicate with a patient. Regardless of how prescriptive the treatment plan, in order to implement effective therapeutic activities PTAs are constantly called upon to use their knowledge while considering available resources and the goals of treatment.

The previous paragraph is demonstrative of the impetus for the writing of this text. As instructors of physical therapist assistants, the authors have painstakingly designed a curriculum with the goal of developing competent physical therapist assistants. They have observed students develop sound technical skills yet struggle with coupling technical prowess with true clinical decision making. When observing students carrying out simulated treatment plans, they have observed students face difficulty with queries such as: "Why did you choose that activity first?" "Why did you decide to start straight leg raises with 5 pounds?" "Why did you choose ambulation distance as the best indicator of progress?"

Even during clinical internships—though generally scoring high marks—students continue to struggle a bit with clinical decision making. Clearly, as clinicians mature and garner experience, their skills in this area improve—processes that seem to require conscious thought become more automatic. It is hoped that this text will jump-start the clinical decision-making process. Hopefully, this text will facilitate the notion of sound clinical decision making, starting in the first PTA foundation courses right through to the more advanced work.

Clinical Decision Making for the Physical Therapist Assistant is designed to not only make students aware of the clinical decisions that must be made but also to guide them on how to make those decisions. This book may be used at any stage of PTA education. Once the student completes a specific topic or skill in a particular course, the student may then read the corresponding chapter within this text. This book may also be used at the end of the formal educational program when students are expected to be able to pull all information together regarding patient treatments.

At the end of most chapters, the student is given the opportunity to answer critical-thinking questions. Additionally, most chapters contain treatment activities, where students can read an evaluation, perform a treatment on a simulated patient, and answer questions related to decisions made during the treatment.

Though some basic didactic information related to the topics covered in this text is provided, it should be clearly understood that this text is not meant as a review of content provided in individual PTA education courses. The basic information that is presented is provided as a reminder of decision-making factors and should not be considered exhaustive. The authors hope that this text adds to an important aspect of PTA education and plays at least a small role in the continued development of competent PTAs.

About the Authors

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Steven B. Skinner is a physical therapy educator and clinician with 28 years of professional experience. He earned his physical therapy credentials from the University of Pennsylvania and holds a master's degree in adapted physical education and a doctorate in healthcare education. Dr. Skinner has worked as a clinician and administrator in several major New York metropolitan healthcare facilities. He has also owned and operated a private practice. Dr. Skinner currently serves as the Director of the Physical Therapist Assistant program at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

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