Fundamentals of the Physical Therapy Examination
To my parents, Barbara and Larry Fruth,
who taught me that the pursuit of education should have no bounds,
fostered in me the confidence to know I can accomplish anything I put my mind to, and
showed me that teaching something you love can be a pretty cool gig.
CHAPTER 1  Introduction to the Physical Therapy Examination   1

PART I  The Patient Interview: Laying a Solid Foundation   9
CHAPTER 2  Cultivating a Therapeutic Partnership   11
CHAPTER 3  Interviewing Techniques and Communication Tools   29
CHAPTER 4  Conduct and Content of the Patient Interview   37

PART II  Tests and Measures: Building on the Foundation   65
CHAPTER 5  Introduction to Physical Therapy Tests and Measures   67
CHAPTER 6  Global Observation, Mental Status, and Functional Assessment   75
CHAPTER 7  Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Examination   101
CHAPTER 8  Integumentary Examination   129
CHAPTER 9  Musculoskeletal Examination   165
CHAPTER 10  Neuromuscular Examination   253
Contents

Foreword   xxii
Preface   xxiii
Acknowledgments   xxv
About the Author   xxvii

CHAPTER 1 Introduction to the Physical Therapy Examination   1
Introduction   2
What Is the Physical Therapy Examination?   2
The Aim of This Text   3
Organization of This Text   3

Part I: The Patient Interview: Laying a Solid Foundation   3
Part II: Tests and Measures: Building on the Foundation   4

Clinical Reasoning   4
Clinical Decision Making   4
Self-Reflection   5

Suggestions to Hone Your Examination Skills   5
Final Words   6
References   6

PART I The Patient Interview: Laying a Solid Foundation   9

CHAPTER 2 Cultivating a Therapeutic Partnership   11

Introduction   12
Fundamental Considerations of Patient Interaction   12

Communication Is THE Key   12
The Expressive Component: Talking with Patients   12
The Receptive Component: The Importance of Listening   13

Preparation of Setting and Self   14
Preparing the Environment   14
Preparing Your Physical Self   15
Preparing Your Mental and Emotional Self   16

Meeting Patients Where They Are   17
Finding Your Inner Chameleon   17
When the Need for Empathy Trumps the Clinician’s Agenda   18
CHAPTER 3 Interviewing Techniques and Communication Tools  29
   Introduction  30
   The Art of Effective Questioning  30
      Types of Questions  30
      Interwoven Communication Tools to Enhance Patient Responses  31
         Promoters  31
         Clarification  31
         Reflection or Echoing  32
         Paraphrasing  32
         Summarizing  32
   The Importance of Nonverbal Language  32
   Communicating Well While Documenting  35
   Chapter Summary  36
   References  36

CHAPTER 4 Conduct and Content of the Patient Interview  37
   Introduction  38
   Conducting the Interview  39
      Pre-interview Tasks  40
         Review Pertinent Information  40
         Patient Observation  40
         Greeting the Patient  41
   Content of the Interview  42
      Theme 1: Relevant Information About the Patient and Current Condition  45
         General Demographics  45
         Current Condition or Chief Complaint  45
         Medications  50
         Laboratory and Diagnostic Tests  51
      Theme 2: Relevant Information About the Patient’s History  52
         Past Episodes of the Current Conditions and Past Interventions  52
         Past Medical and Past Surgical History  53
         Family Medical History  53
Theme 3: Relevant Information About the Patient's Life and Living Environment 54
  Physical Environment and Available Resources 54
  Employment/Work (Job, School, and/or Play) 55
  Recreation and Social Activities 56
  Current and Previous Activity and Participation 56
  General Health Status; Health and Social Habits 57

Final Components of the Patient Interview 59
  Verbal Review of Systems 59
  Patients' Goals for Physical Therapy 61
  The Interview Summary 61

Documenting the Patient Interview 62
Chapter Summary 63
References 63

PART II Tests and Measures: Building on the Foundation 65

CHAPTER 5 Introduction to Physical Therapy Tests and Measures 67
  Introduction to Tests and Measures 68
  Transition from the Patient Interview to Performing Tests and Measures 68
  What Tests and Measures Are Available? 70
  Choosing the Appropriate Tests and Measures 71
  Content and Organization of the Remaining Chapters 73
  Final Words 74
  References 74

CHAPTER 6 Global Observation, Mental Status, and Functional Assessment 75
  Introduction 76
  Section 1: Global Observation 77
    Introduction 77
    Fundamental Concepts 77
    Priority or Pointless? 78
    Case Example 79
  Section 2: Communication Assessment 80
    Introduction 80
    Fundamental Concepts 80
    Procedure 81
    Priority or Pointless? 82
    Case Example 82
# Section 3: Cognition Assessment

**Introduction** 83  
**Fundamental Concepts** 83  
**Procedure** 85  
**Priority or Pointless?** 87  
**Case Example** 87

# Section 4: Screening for Emotional and Psychological Factors

**Introduction** 88  
**Fundamental Concepts** 88  
**Procedure** 89  
**Priority or Pointless?** 91  
**Case Example** 92

# Section 5: Functional Assessment

**Introduction** 93  
**Fundamental Concepts** 93  
**Procedure** 94  
**Priority or Pointless?** 95  
**Case Example** 96

## Chapter Summary

**References** 97

# Chapter 7: Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Examination

**Introduction** 102  
**Section 1: Core Vital Signs** 104  
**Introduction** 104  
**Pulse** 104  
**Fundamental Concepts** 104  
**Procedure** 105  
  
  **Pulse Points** 105  
  **Assessment of Pulse** 106  
**Respiration** 106  
**Fundamental Concepts** 106  
**Procedure** 107  
  
  **Assessment of Respiration** 107  
**Blood Pressure** 108  
**Fundamental Concepts** 108  
  
  **Equipment Used for Blood Pressure Measurement** 110
CHAPTER 8  Integumentary Examination  129

Introduction  130

Section 1: Examination of the Skin  132

Introduction  132
Fundamental Concepts  132
Screening Inspection of the Skin  133
  Color  133
  Temperature  134
  Texture  134
  Moisture  134
  Turgor  134
  Edema and Effusion  134

Screening for Malignancies of the Skin  134

Screening Inspection of the Hair and Nails  136
  Hair  136
  Nails  136

Signs of Inflammation and Infection  137
Priority or Pointless?  138
Case Example  139

Section 2: Identification of Pressure Ulcers  140

Introduction  140
Fundamental Concepts  140
  Risk Factors for Pressure Ulcer Development  140
  Common Locations of Pressure Ulcers  140

Procedures to Identify Potential and Active Pressure Ulcers  140
  Identification of Areas at Risk  140
  Classification of Pressure Ulcers  142

Priority or Pointless?  144
Case Example  144

Section 3: Identification of Vascular Ulcers  145

Introduction  145
Fundamental Concepts  145
  Arterial Insufficiency  145
  Venous Insufficiency  145

Procedures to Identify Vascular Insufficiency  146
  Assessment of Peripheral Pulses  148
  Venous Filling Time  149
Capillary Refill Time   149
Ankle-Brachial Index and Toe-Brachial Index   149
Pitting Edema   149

Priority or Pointless?   149
Case Example   150

Section 4: Identification of Neuropathic Ulcers   151

Introduction   151
Fundamental Concepts   151
Diabetic Neuropathy   151
Diabetes and Vascular Disease   152

Procedures to Identify Neuropathy and Active Diabetic Ulcers   152
Observation and Palpation   152
Sensory Examination   153
Peripheral Vascular Examination   153
Describing and Classifying Diabetic Wounds   154

Priority or Pointless?   155
Case Example   156

Section 5: Other Wounds and Burns   157

Introduction   157
Fundamental Concepts   157
Skin Tears   157
Surgical Wounds   157
Burns   158

Case Example   160

Chapter Summary   161
References   161

CHAPTER 9  Musculoskeletal Examination   165

Introduction   166

Section 1: Posture and Alignment   167

Introduction   167
Fundamental Concepts   167
Procedure   170
Informal Postural Assessment   170
Formal Postural Assessment   171

Priority or Pointless?   175
Case Example   176
Section 2: Gait  177
Introduction  177
Fundamental Concepts  177
Gait Characteristics and Quality  177
  Gait Cycle Terminology  177
  Descriptions of Common Pathological Gait Patterns  179
  The Importance of Gait Speed  181
Procedure  181
Priority or Pointless?  182
Case Example  183

Section 3: Range of Motion  184
Introduction  184
Fundamental Concepts  185
  Active Range of Motion  185
    Limited Active Range of Motion  185
  Passive Range of Motion  185
    Joint End Feel  186
    Quantifying AROM and PROM  187
    Documenting the Estimated ROM  188
Procedure  189
Priority or Pointless?  201
Case Example  201

Section 4: Muscle Length  203
Introduction  203
Fundamental Concepts  203
Procedure  204
Priority or Pointless?  214
Case Example  215

Section 5: Gross Muscle Strength  216
Introduction  216
Fundamental Concepts  216
  Grading of Gross Strength  217
Procedure  217
Priority or Pointless?  228
Case Example  229

Section 6: Dermatomes and Myotomes  230
Introduction  230
Fundamental Concepts  230
## Dermatomes

**Myotomes** 231

### Procedure

**Dermatomes** 231

**Myotomes** 232

**Priority or Pointless?** 236

**Case Example** 237

## Section 7: Deep Tendon Reflexes 238

### Introduction

238

### Fundamental Concepts

238

**Hypotonic DTRs** 238

**Hypertonic DTRs** 239

### Procedure

239

**Priority or Pointless?** 242

**Case Example** 243

## Section 8: Palpation 244

### Introduction

244

### Fundamental Concepts

244

### Procedure

245

**Priority or Pointless?** 247

**Case Example** 248

## Chapter Summary 249

## References 249

## CHAPTER 10  Neuromuscular Examination 253

### Introduction 254

### Section 1: Somatosensory Function 255

### Introduction 255

### Fundamental Concepts 255

### Procedure 258

**Light Touch** 258

**Protective Sensation** 259

**Pain** (also considered the Sharp/Dull test) 260

**Vibration** 260

**Temperature** 261

**Position Sense** 262

**Discriminative Sensation** 263

**Priority or Pointless?** 265

**Case Example** 266
Section 2: Coordination  267
Introduction  267
Fundamental Concepts  267
Procedure  267

Upper Extremity Tests  268
- Rapid Alternating Movements (RAM)  268
- Finger Opposition  268
- Finger to Nose (or Chin)  268
- Finger to Clinician Finger  268

Lower Extremity Tests  268
- Heel to Shin  268
- Toe to Clinician Finger  269
- Toe Tapping  269
- Tests of Standing or Walking  269

Priority or Pointless?  270
Case Example  271

Section 3: Balance  272
Introduction  272
Fundamental Concepts  272
- Sensory System  272
- Sensorimotor Integration  273
- Motor Output  273
- The Role of Cognition  273

Procedure  273
- Confidence in Balance  274
- Sitting Balance  274
- Static Standing Balance Tests  274
  - Romberg Test  274
  - Single-Limb Stance Test  275
- Reactive Balance Tests  276
  - Nudge/Push Test  276
- Anticipatory Balance Tests  277
  - Functional Reach Test  277
  - Catching  277
- Dynamic Balance Tests  278

Priority or Pointless?  279
Case Example  280
Recently I was asked to give a reflection on wisdom for an ecumenical service marking the centennial of the college where I work. Although one might think that writing a reflection for a church service would be very different from writing the foreword to a physical therapy text, in this case there were remarkable similarities. For both writing tasks, I found myself reflecting on the differences between information and wisdom.

One of the features of life in the twenty-first century is the widespread availability of information. Anyone with an Internet connection or a smartphone can find out the current temperature in Istanbul or the birthdate of their favorite celebrity. But information is not wisdom. Systems theorist Russell Ackoff defined a hierarchy of mental content that starts with data; moves upward through information, knowledge, and understanding; and is capped with wisdom.1 The first four of these deal with the past, with what has been or what is already known. Only the fifth level, wisdom, Ackoff says, is future oriented, allowing us to innovate and to choose between different courses of action. Bellinger and colleagues interpret Ackoff’s hierarchy by providing an amusing example that illustrates how we are able to detect patterns and relationships in information to create higher-level thinking. They ask their readers to consider the following:

• I have a box.
• The box is 3 feet wide, 3 feet deep, and 6 feet high.
• The box is very heavy.
• The box has a door on the front of it.
• When I open the box, it has food in it.
• It is colder inside the box than it is outside.
• You usually find the box in the kitchen.
• There is a smaller compartment inside the box with ice in it.
• When you open the door, the light comes on.
• When you move this box, you usually find lots of dirt underneath it.
• Junk has a real habit of collecting on top of this box.2

Of course, at some point in the sequence of bullets, you understood that a refrigerator was being described. You detected the pattern and thought, “aha, a fridge!” You didn’t need the bullets about the freezer section, or the light, or the dirt and the junk. A trivial example, perhaps, but one to which most readers can relate.

In this text Dr. Fruth helps novice physical therapists learn how to collect data and information and turn it into clinical understanding and wisdom. She does this with a remarkable combination of head and heart. Starting first with several chapters about the patient interview, she helps students understand how their appearance and body language affect their perceived trustworthiness; she challenges readers to think about how their unconscious biases might influence their clinical interactions; and she reminds
readers that their deep listening skills should let each patient know that he or she is the most important person in the room. She introduces a useful priority/possible/pointless rubric for deciding what questions to include in the interview, showing them the physical therapy equivalent to “aha, a fridge”: providing guidelines for collecting data that will establish a pattern, giving permission to stop asking questions when the pattern is clear, and determining when it is important to search for red flags that could indicate that an unexpected pattern might be at play.

After the interview chapters, Fruth provides a comprehensive treatment of physical therapy tests and measures, using the Guide to Physical Therapist Practice as her framework. Once again, her priority/possible/pointless rubric shows novice clinicians how to be thorough, yet judicious, in their use of tests and measures. In today’s health-care system, where patient-centered care can be in tension with productivity expectations and cost pressures, such a thoughtful presentation of how to practice with both efficiency and integrity is welcome.

As I read this text, I had the sense that I was working side-by-side with a master clinician. In an environment in which students are expected to “hit the ground running” when they begin their clinical training, this text offers the advice one would expect from a skilled clinician—practical yet well-referenced, basic yet sophisticated, and challenging yet supportive. The text does nothing less than help its readers learn to think like physical therapists, collecting data and turning it into clinical wisdom.

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REFERENCES
Seven years ago, as I embarked on my first faculty position at the University of Indianapolis, I was charged with teaching a course sequence in the Doctor of Physical Therapy program called Generic Examination I and II. Although I was not terribly fond of the course name, I was thrilled to get to teach the content: the “generic” skills required to conduct a basic physical therapy examination with a wide variety of patients. Who wouldn’t want to teach the fun clinical stuff, right? With this excitement, however, came the anxiety-provoking realization that I was responsible for something that would affect each student’s ability to perform one of the most vital components of a physical therapist’s practice: a thorough, concise, and meaningful patient examination.

Like any instructor assigned to teach new content, I went in search of a textbook I could both recommend to my students and use to supplement my teaching. It wasn’t long before I realized that what I was looking for didn’t exist. There were a number of textbooks that covered advanced tests and measures, and many that dealt with examination techniques specific to a certain genre of patients. But I was unable to find anything that encapsulated the skills necessary for a novice student to learn the art and science of conducting both the interview and tests/measures components of an initial examination with a variety of patients. That first year I scrambled to create a 38-page course packet to provide students with rudimentary “how to” information. Over the next 7 years, I sought substantial input from students, graduates, and my colleagues who taught advanced skills. This invaluable feedback allowed that little course packet to grow to a 150-page manual (well known to many UIndy DPT graduates as the “Purple Book”). As the Purple Book evolved over the years, I increasingly heard, “You need to publish this!” Trusting that positive feedback and my inherent “why not?” mentality, that’s just what I did.

The essential purpose of Fundamentals of the Physical Therapy Examination: Patient Interview and Tests & Measures is to provide novice to intermediate students of physical therapy with a resource that can be used both in the classroom and the clinic to help them learn methods of collecting meaningful verbal, observational, and measured data from any patient, regardless of setting or diagnosis. It also is designed as a classroom resource for physical therapy faculty who, like me, have been searching for a text that covers this broad content in a classroom-friendly way. This text is intended for active use! Students are encouraged to highlight content, write notes in it, frequent the companion website to watch the how-to videos, and take it along during clinical experiences. Faculty are encouraged to use the multitude of short case examples as classroom talking points, utilize the step-by-step instructions of how to perform each test/measure (while emphasizing the need to adapt based
on individual patient needs), and show the accompanying technique-based videos to complement classroom instruction.

What makes this text different from most is that it does not ask the reader to learn methods of examining a particular body region or a specific condition. Instead, common interview questions and a myriad of physical tests/measures are described, and the reader is asked to consider which questions and which tests/measures are appropriate for any given patient. As experienced clinicians well know, “textbook” patients are few and far between. Physical therapists must have the knowledge and confidence to assess problems or conditions that may be outside any given patient’s presenting diagnosis. This text encourages students to understand that it is never too early to learn this essential skill of clinical decision making.

The first chapter of this text describes the global concepts and content of the remaining chapters, which are presented in two interrelated parts. Part I (Laying a Solid Foundation) focuses on what many clinicians would argue is the most important part of the patient examination: the initial interview. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the vital aspects of creating rapport and an environment of trust, using a variety of communication tools, understanding the influence of biopsychosocial and cultural factors, recognizing personal biases, and appreciating the need to meet patients where they are. Chapter 4 then provides a thorough description of categories, types, and examples of interview questions. A “priority/possible/pointless” clinical decision-making system is introduced, encouraging and empowering students to embrace this essential component of an autonomous profession.

Part II (Building on the Foundation) begins with a chapter describing the transition from patient interview to performance of tests and measures. Emphasis is placed on the importance of using information gathered from the interview to guide decisions about which tests/measures are appropriate. The remaining chapters describe the purposes and techniques of fundamental tests and measures commonly utilized in patient examinations, organized in a combined body system/patient condition manner. The “priority/possible/pointless” system is carried through each chapter, encouraging even novice clinicians to make clinical decisions about which tests/measures are essential and which ones may be unnecessary.

Brief case examples, accompanied by sample documentation, allow the reader to understand each test/measure in the context of a patient scenario. While complete case examples may be helpful to more advanced learners who have a greater ability to grasp the big picture, I have found that novice students often become overwhelmed or lost when trying to make sense of full cases. Thus, the case examples provided after each test/measure are purposefully short and focused to help the reader learn how information gathered from the patient leads to the selection of particular tests/measures and documentation of the findings.

Most students of physical therapy are visual or kinesthetic learners. The most requested study aid from my students has been pictures and videos of the techniques covered in class. Therefore, this text is laden with photos, and its companion website houses multiple videos that demonstrate most of the tests/measures described. In addition, videos of two complete initial examinations are provided. Students may find these helpful to obtain a “big picture” view of the examination process; instructors may find it helpful to use portions of these videos to highlight particular aspects of a typical patient examination.

Finally, my love and passion for teaching this content has only grown in the past 7 years, and I hope this is conveyed throughout the text. I also hope you find this text easy and enjoyable to read and, above all, one that is truly an asset on your journey toward becoming a confident, skilled, and successful physical therapist who finds as much reward in this profession as I have.
The evolution of this text, from a tiny course packet to what you currently hold in your hands, has only been possible because of the encouragement, advice, reassurance, prayers, and patience I have received from countless individuals. I am indebted to those at Jones & Bartlett Learning for having faith in my vision for this book. Specific acknowledgment goes to Joe Morita, Senior Acquisitions Editor, Kayla Dos Santos, Editorial Assistant, and Jessica Newfell, Production Editor, for your counsel, guidance, and enthusiasm every step of the way. I also would like to thank the University of Indianapolis for granting me a semester sabbatical, without which I would likely still be writing the first chapter.

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