

A Student's Perspective on Becoming the First Student Member of the APTA PA Ethics Committee

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In today's ever-changing medical landscape, entry-level physical therapists must make thousands of clinical decisions daily. Just 20 years ago, physical therapists were primarily viewed as technicians who did not diagnose and did not develop clinical prognoses. As our clinical roles have evolved toward autonomous direct-access care, our ethical, behavioral, clinical, and research responsibilities have needed to simultaneously evolve as well.¹ This evolution-in-practice can be complicated and overwhelming for a new graduate or student physical therapist. Four key documents should be maintained on the desks of all student and novice therapists. Without a strong foundational content knowledge of ethics and an understanding of these four key documents, the new practitioner can easily make errors in ethical judgement.

- The Code of Ethics of the Physical Therapist
- Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant
- Standards of Practice of Physical Therapy; and
- The State Practice Act

Ethics must be a consideration when making any clinical, behavioral, or research decision.² A strong ethical framework ensures the patient stays at the center of the patient-care model. Lapses in moral judgement, especially when it becomes public knowledge, damages the public trust in physical therapy as a profession. We need public trust if we want to truly be known as the practitioners of choice to address movement system deficits. Ethical practice is the basis of building an identity of trust with our patients based on public perception.³

The Code of Ethics and Standards of Ethical Conduct describe ethical tenets, considerations, and concepts that must be included to maximize outcomes related to decision-making.^{4,5} These documents have been written in a language that remains stable even as the health system evolves. However, we are individually responsible for the correct interpretation and application and should have a sufficiently

robust understanding of these documents to ensure ethical practice. Fortunately, many professional resources are available when faced with complex and challenging decision-making. Most state chapters of the APTA have ethics committees, and nationally, the Ethics and Judicial Committee of the APTA is an excellent resource.

As the first student member of the APTA PA Ethics Committee, I believe student members can be critical additions to each state's physical therapy ethics chapter, offering new insights and perspectives that practicing therapists may not otherwise be aware of. Student members experience ethical issues that begin in graduate programs and may continue into practice. Additionally, these students, through mentorship, can gain a solid ethical foundation that can be carried throughout their careers. They can share ethical knowledge on clinical rotations in mediums like in-service presentations. When these students graduate, they can help to cultivate a culture of ethics in the clinics where they are employed. Fostering a solid ethical foundation in today's students ensures that the physical therapists of tomorrow will have that basis of knowledge to continue giving good quality patient-centered care. These students will carry us into the future, and the hope is that this future will expand the autonomy and demand of physical therapists nationwide. We need to prepare this next generation of therapists for the increased responsibility of this type of practice by ensuring they understand the core ethical principles of physical therapy practice. What better way than to give them a seat at the table early in their careers? I am so grateful to APTA PA and the APTA PA Ethics Committee for this opportunity!

References:

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