

Physical Therapy in Portugal

The Physical Therapy grew in Portugal, especially in the last 50 years, being currently the third largest area of health care and the most representative profession in the area of Rehabilitation.

In the 1960s, a few dozen physical therapists exerted the profession. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Physical Therapy started to be practiced by a few hundred professionals, and in the 2000s there were approximately 2,000 physical therapists. In recent years, one may see an exponential development: according to the Central Administration of the Health System, there are currently about 12,000 physical therapists in Portugal¹.

The Portuguese Association of Physical Therapists (APFISIO) is the organization that represents these professionals in Portugal, and is integrated in the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) and in the World Health Professions Alliance. A process has been initiated by the APFISIO on the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic so that physical therapists are regulated by an Order. This has already been generically approved in a plenary session and currently awaits specific legislation.

In Portugal, the Physical Therapy training consists of four years in the polytechnic education level. According to the Basic Law of the Educational System, higher education comprises the university and polytechnic systems. Polytechnic education is more practice-oriented, whereas the university is more geared towards the theory. For the full access to a licentiate degree, the candidate must have 12 full years of education and perform tests of access to higher education in public institutions. All courses are evaluated by the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES), whose mission is to ensure the quality of higher education in Portugal through the assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and their study programs, as well as by the performance of functions inherent to the insertion of Portugal into the European system of higher education quality assurance.

In Portugal, physical therapists exert their activity in the National Health Service (SNS), in the public sector, according to various models

and contexts of service provision. However, currently, most physical therapists work in the private sector. Thus, Physical Therapy is a profession with more expression in private activity, as it is exercised mostly by physical therapists who work independently in the private sector.

Currently, there are nineteen licentiate courses in Physical Therapy in Portugal – seven in public institutions and twelve in the private education. There are also seven master's degrees in Physical Therapy, administered by basic training schools. Some of these master's degrees specialize in studies on musculoskeletal, aging, women's health, dermatofunctional, and neurology areas, among others, and have a duration of two school years. There is only one doctoral program in Physical Therapy, in the Faculty of Sports at the University of Porto.

Masters' graduate education in Physical Therapy allowed an academic and scientific development of the profession in Portugal. The Portuguese law of higher education only recently allowed to the polytechnic education the realization of doctorate in Physical Therapy, assuming that some institutions will soon start having their own doctoral programs.

It is worth mentioning that, in Portugal, physical therapists give great attention to their continuing education and are investing more and more in scientific research, promoting the production of knowledge in national and international scientific journals.

Isabel Sousa Coutinho

Luisa Pedro

Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa

Escola Superior de Tecnologia da Saúde de Lisboa

*Teaching and Research Unit in Physical Therapy
and Rehabilitation*

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