

Dear Licensees:

Recently the Board has received questions regarding whether it is appropriate for a physical therapist assistant (PTA) to perform dry needling. The Board believes this provides a good opportunity to review key information in the Practice Act and how the Administrative Code for physical therapy applies in the State of Alabama.

The Administrative Code does not elaborate on which treatment techniques are or are not within the individual PTA's skill set. The Administrative Code allows for the fact that different clinicians have varying levels of training and skill above entry-level. To that end, the Administrative Code places responsibility on the directing physical therapist (PT) to determine what treatment is appropriate to delegate to a PTA. However, a PTA is also responsible for refusing to carry out treatment they believe is not in the patient's best interests.

Under Roles and Responsibilities of a Physical Therapist, Section 700-X-3-.03(3)(a) of the Administrative Code states in pertinent part:

[t]he roles and responsibilities of a person licensed by this Board to practice physical therapy in the State of Alabama generally are... 6. [t]o select and delegate the appropriate portions of the treatment plan and program..7.... [t]o delegate only those patient care duties to supportive personnel who are qualified under the provisions of these rules to perform such duties.

Furthermore, Section 700-X-3-.02(2), "Unbecoming Conduct/Conduct Detrimental To The Best Interest Of The Public Prohibited", includes, "[c]ertain Conduct Specifically Prohibited...(k) [d]elegating responsibilities to a person when the licensee delegating such responsibilities knows or has reason to know that such person is not qualified by education, by experience, or by licensure to perform them."

According to Section 700-X-3-.03 (b):

[t]he roles and responsibilities of a person licensed by this Board to practice as a physical therapist assistant in the State of Alabama generally are...1. [t]o practice only under the direction of a physical therapist licensed to practice in the State of Alabama...3. [t]o perform treatment procedures as delegated by the physical therapist but not to initiate or alter a treatment plan...7. [t]o refuse to carry out treatment procedures that they believe to be not in the best interest of the patient.

To summarize, determining what treatment is appropriate to delegate to a PTA is the responsibility of the directing PT. Employers do not have the authority or responsibility to make that determination. Furthermore, the liability rests with licensees: the PTA and the directing PT. If any adverse event or mismanagement occurs leading to legal proceedings, the PTA and the directing PT are both accountable for what has been delegated to the PTA, and professionals are typically judged based on the acceptable standards of practice or care. It is not the role of the licensing board to establish best practices. There are many resources that provide guidance in this area, including the American Physical Therapy Association.