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Physical Therapist Assistant Training: Documentation Guidelines

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Abstract

This essay details the development of a training document for physical therapist assistants to improve their documentation and clearly lay out the legal requirements and company expectations of their documentation. The final draft has been finished and is planned to be distributed in Quarter 2 of 2022.

Keywords: PTA, Physical Therapy, CMS, Documentation, Training, Physical Therapy Assistant

Introduction

Section 1: Innovative Approach

Bringing Together Perspectives

My project sought to answer the question “How might I provide information company-wide for Physical Therapist Assistants (PTAs) on expectations and requirements for documentation that meet our company’s and legal requirements?” The reason I chose to tackle this problem with my project is currently there is no cohesive training for PTAs within my company (nor any other company I have worked for) to clearly explain the expectations and requirements they need to adhere to with their documentation. All pieces of training are geared toward Physical Therapists and PTAs are expected to pick and choose what applies to them and guess at what is not in the training because it does not apply to Physical Therapists. The stakeholders of my project (the PTAs in my company and my company’s compliance department specifically) will be able to get a clear picture of the expectations and legal requirements for PTA documentation. By implementing this training document for PTAs I hope to answer the question “How might I provide information company-wide for Physical Therapist Assistants (PTAs) on expectations and requirements for documentation that meet our company’s and legal requirements?”

Creating Innovative Approaches: Beyond Either/Or

I am the only PTA in the compliance department as the other employees are physical therapists. They are wonderful people who are well versed in compliance and physical therapy rules but lack the perspective and knowledge I have as a PTA. There are aspects of documentation that physical therapists do not have to think about that are vitally important to a PTA’s documentation. I have utilized my knowledge as a PTA and my knowledge of compliance

to put together clear training on the guidelines and expectations of PTAs. In my personal experience and my additional research, I have not been able to find any pieces of training specifically for PTAs about improving their documentation or providing guidance on what is expected of them in their documentation. This project will be the first of its kind for at least my company. It will provide a clear and concise guide for PTA's and the other stakeholders as to what is expected of them and what is legally required of their documentation.

I spoke to the Head of Compliance for my company and the Assistant Compliance Officer of my company to discuss what the company wanted from the PTA's and what they were often seeing was overlooked in their documentation. I also reached out to several PTAs both within my company and previous coworkers of mine who worked at PTAs to gain their perspective on a training of this type. My main sources were the American Physical Therapy Association and The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, they provided the most up-to-date knowledge and legal requirements for physical therapy documentation, though it is often set in very hard-to-read legal documents. I will continue to check with these sources up until the final submission as The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services often revises its rules and regulations multiple times a year.

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence

Awareness of Self and Others

The work that I have done with the PTA documentation training demonstrates awareness of others and myself as I know there is a frustration within my profession that there is a lack of guidance and training tailored for just physical therapist assistants. I have been frustrated by this in the past and colleagues have expressed to me they often feel like an afterthought in our profession. There is a definite frustration between PTA's and upper management of companies

because management expects PTA's to glean knowledge through "trickle-down" throughout what trainings the PTs they work with attend or to just pick and choose what information applies to them in the pieces of training that are put out for PTs. This frustration is a two-way street because management does not know why all their employees are not getting the same information and PTAs are not being adequately trained on company policies and expectations through primary sources.

Through my proposal, I have improved my self-awareness. I hadn't realized how frustrated I was about the lack of direct information available to PTA's about what was expected of their documentation and how to improve it. Information I received while practicing as a PTA was often conflicting and I never had any feedback from official channels to know if what I was doing was correct. It caused me to self-reflect on how far my frustrations with my profession went and propelled me to speak to my bosses about greater representation and acknowledgments in the company for PTAs.

Consideration of the Audience: Emotional Intelligence

I believe my approach and recommendations do consider the emotional intelligence of the audience. My training will be distributed through the compliance department and leave room for direct communication between myself, PTA's, and the head of compliance to assure all issues are addressed to the best of my (and their) ability. There will be no assigning of blame and hopefully, this will begin to bridge the gap of communication between upper management and PTA. I have reached out to PTAs in the company to get their feedback on the training document and what they would like to see included and the feedback has been mostly positive, though there has been frustration expressed about the amount of documentation required for treatment notes. This is very usual for our profession though, no one got into physical therapy for the love

of paperwork.

Value to Others: Emotional Intelligence

My research is valuable to others because it will provide clear and concise direction and guidance on the requirements of PTA documentation. It will provide direction on both company policies and legal requirements on documentation. It will also provide clarity for the compliance department on what is required of PTA's documentation, making it easier to begin to audit their documentation in the future with consistency and accuracy.

Section 3: Creative Thinking

The Creative Framework

I arranged the data I collected into a multipage document that was organized so the information would be found in the order one would need it while writing their documentation. I also provided examples at the end of the document for clarity. The document went through several draft phases with feedback from the compliance team, PTAs within the organization, and several student PTAs who are learning proper documentation techniques. Their feedback was used to make sure the final training document was clear, concise, and easy to reference.

Unique Approach to the Project

I was able to comb through the American Medical Association, the American Physical Therapy Association, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for the current legal standards required for physical therapy documentation that are relevant to PTAs. I was able to utilize guidelines aimed at PTs "cherry-picked" for relevant information and add more information with the requirements that aren't often (if at all) talked about as they are only relevant to PTAs. This includes things like what to put in the documentation when you received verbal orders from the PTs to adjust the Plan of Care of a patient and where to put language in

the documentation if there has been a change in the patient's clinical presentation you've notified the primary PT. These are both things never addressed in PT training, as PTs don't need to address how they talked to themselves in the documentation.

The final document will be distributed in the second quarter of 2022 to all PTAs, the compliance team, and the clinical directors within the company I work for via email, and the document will be shared with the head of compliance for easy editing as company policies and legal and insurance requirements for documentation change throughout the years. Our company also lacks a central area for training new hires, as we have clinics throughout the United States, so distributing the document via email will make sure every current and future employee has access to the newest version of the document at any given point.

Section 4: Innovative Solution

Accomplishment of Capstone

I have researched, organized, and will be distributing an informative handout to all Physical Therapist Assistants throughout my company. I have received feedback from individuals from within the compliance department who will eventually be using the training documented as a rubric to audit PTA documentation for adherence to legal and company guidelines, PTAs who are currently employed by the company, and several student PTAs who were currently learning how to write documentation and treat patients.

I utilized the feedback from these sources to make the PTA training handout as user-friendly and concise as possible. I made sure to add the pertinent information they suggested as long as it was supported by company, legal, or insurance literature. This is in the hopes that the document can be an easy reference guide for PTAs to limit the time they have to take to implement the changes needed to make their documentation meet legal and company standards

and improve the likelihood of mass implementation. It is also arranged in an order that makes it easy to reference for both the PTAs and later auditors who will be using it to assess their documentation.

Hopefully, this project will improve the quality of documentation for PTA's within the company by clarifying what is needed from them. It will increase the burden of documentation for some PTA's who are currently not meeting documentation standards but as they learn how to implement the information into their notes hopefully it won't add much time into their day. Compliance auditors will eventually be able to use the training handout as a reference/rubric when they begin to audit PTA documentation, which is planned for the end of 2022 or the beginning of 2023 at this point in time.

Innovative Approach to the Problem/Project

My approach to PTA documentation training was more innovative than other approaches because it was written for and directed at PTAs instead of PTs. That doesn't seem like innovative detail but for as long as I have been practicing I've never attended or been involved in a training directed at PTA. The other innovative part of my project was involving the perspective of PTA students. I wanted to make sure this handout was clear and easy to understand and by having students who had very little knowledge and experience in the field vet the handout I was able to make sure that the document was written in an easy to follow and understandable manner.

Section 5: Results

Benefits to Stakeholders

The stakeholders are specifically the PTAs in my company and my company's compliance department. They will be able to get a clear picture of the expectations and legal requirements for PTA documentation. There is a lot of unnecessary confusion and disconnected communication

from governing bodies, the company, other colleagues, etc that results in PTA not realizing they aren't meeting company standards or legal requirements for their documentation. Physical Therapist Assistants in my company will be provided a clear layout of expectations and requirements to allow for easy education about the current legal standards and company guidelines. This document will make it clear what the expectations allow for auditors to later have a clear rubric to grade PTA documentation as the compliance department begins to add in audits of PTA documentation later this year.

Impact on Stakeholders

Overall, PTAs will have to spend a little more time on their documentation. Especially in the short term, they'll have to spend time making sure they are crossing their T's and dotting their I's to meet compliance standards. The feedback I have received from the 10 PTA's who have seen the current form of the handout is the document is helpful, though there are a lot of "nitpick" details contained in it. Unfortunately, those details are as important as they are annoying. The head of the compliance department has taken the training document and presented it to the compliance board, once it is approved or approved pending recommended changes, it will be distributed company-wide to PTAs. They will be given 2 quarters to implement the changes into their documentation. After the 2 quarters of transition time, the compliance team will begin to audit PTA documentation as well as the PT documentation they currently audit. The PTA Documentation Training handout will serve as a rubric for grading during the auditing process. The auditors will be able to utilize the training document to know what is required of PTA documentation and give feedback and dock points accordingly to what is missing.

Section 6: Conclusion

I am happy that with the completion of the PTA training handout I can share the document with the compliance department so that it can be continually updated to reflect the most current legal and company requirements. This is one of the reasons why it was best to have the training done as a document to be emailed out, the other was my company is very decentralized and it would be a logistical challenge to deliver the training over a video call. The compliance department has already reviewed the document and the other auditor has expressed she saw things in the document that she was unaware PTAs were required to do. This auditor has been a PT for over 10 years and worked with many PTAs but sometimes little things go unnoticed when we do not have to do them.

I was challenged by this project, I have never put together a training document outside of a classroom setting. I found myself thinking about every little aspect of the handout, the font, the margins, single or double spacing? Should I use APA guidelines when providing references? I was able to reach out to others in the compliance department who had provided similar training handouts to PTs in the past and get their advice. I was pleased with the outcome of this project and happy with the language and formatting skills I gained in regard creating to education handouts for the workplace.

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