Physical Agent Modalities: A Position Paper

Debbie Amini

Q: I am a generalist occupational therapist in the process of taking multiple continuing education courses to prepare for a career move into hand therapy. I would like to take a course to learn the application of physical agent modalities (PAMs) and wonder if the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) has a stance with regard to their use by occupational therapy practitioners.

A: AOTA does have an official stance on the use of PAMs. This is described in the form of a position paper, a document developed by the Commission on Practice that presents the official stance of the Association on a substantive issue or subject. In Physical Agent Modalities: A Position Paper,1,2 AOTA does indeed support the use of PAM devices and techniques by occupational therapy practitioners who have established competency in their application. This document was updated in 2007 and is very explicit about which modalities are considered appropriate, and under which circumstances they are considered appropriate for use by OTs and OTAs.

According to the position paper, PAMs are procedures and interventions that are applied to the client to modify client factors such as those of the neurological, musculoskeletal, or integumentary system when conditions are present that limit occupational engagement.1,2 Examples include, but are not limited to, superficial thermal modalities such as hot packs and cold packs; deep thermal agents such as ultrasound; electrotherapeutic agents such as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS); and mechanical devices such as continuous passive motion machines.

The position paper states that both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants may administer PAMs, but that both professional levels must have demonstrated and verifiable competence in their use. Foundational knowledge must be acquired and documented through appropriate educational venues. Such venues include college courses, professional continuing education courses, or institutes at AOTA’s Annual Conference & Expo. Informal and nonformal training, including in-service events provided by non-clinician vendors, are not considered appropriate educational venues. Appropriate education must cover the safe and effective administration of PAMs and must always include knowledge of human anatomy, physiology, and the properties of electricity, sound, light, water, and temperature and their effect on the human body. Indications, contraindications, and precautions must also be part of any PAMs educational programming.

In keeping with supervision requirements, occupational therapy assistants should always administer PAMs under the plan of care and appropriate supervision of an occupational therapist. Both OTs and OTAs should be supervised by clinicians with previously established competency until their own skill and professional judgment in selecting, modifying, and integrating into an intervention plan is demonstrated and correctly documented.1,2

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process,3 describes PAMs as preparatory methods that can be used to support and promote the acquisition of the performance skills necessary to enable an individual to resume or assume habits, routines, and roles for engagement in occupation.1,2

This is one of the most important concepts for OT practitioners to understand when they make the decision to use PAMs in treatment. PAMs must be used by OT practitioners in preparation for or during a client’s actual engagement in relevant activities and occupations. The use of PAMs for the isolated purpose of changing client factors without an explicit and immediate connection to functional engagement is not the practice of OT.

Because position papers do not hold any legal bearing and are created for the purpose of guiding professional decision making and consistency, it should be remembered that all state laws and regulations related to PAMs have precedence over AOTA policies and positions. ■

References

Debbie Amini, MEd, OTR/L, CHT, is the chairperson of the Physical Disabilities Special Interest Section (SIS) and the SIS liaison to the Commission on Practice.

In Practice Perks, Commission on Practice (COP) members provide regular summaries of different official documents. These documents can be found in the American Journal of Occupational Therapy and in The Reference Manual of the Official Documents of The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. More information about COP can be found on the AOTA Web site at www.aota.org in the Practice and Ethics section.