PHYSIOTHERAPIST

PRIVATE PRACTICE

What is your role and what kind of duties and responsibilities are involved?
So, our role here and our philosophy is to make people move better and feel better. With physiotherapy training you learn how to assess injuries, make a diagnosis and then from that diagnosis, formulate a treatment plan. This is not limited to just injury management and often involves injury prevention now as well. I'm a physiotherapist. We all sort of have our favourite niches that we go into but if someone comes in with an ankle injury or arm injury, then I'm fit for all. For me, I'm a strong believer in strength and conditioning and exercise rehabilitation. On a normal day, the first thing I will do is look at my diary for the day and the patients that I'm seeing, review the clinical notes and update myself on current research before I see the patient and establish the treatment plan going forward. It can be a bit of admin when you first walk in but then the rest of the day is mostly interacting with people which is really enjoyable.

Does your role require any ongoing professional learning?
Always! You never stop. As a registered physiotherapist, there is a requirement that you complete a certain amount of professional development but, if you're a good physiotherapist, you're always wanting to do that anyway. Everyone who walks through the door is slightly different and you might want to get better at that one thing so, you go and do a course so that you can nail it better for the next person. That sort of will and drive has to be instilled in you to be a physiotherapist. The people who don't have that don't tend to continue in the profession normally. Some organisations like the one I work for have great in-house professional development where we review difficult cases and learn from each other but a lot of the time the specialist courses are out of usual business hours. I'm actually studying an extra degree at the moment which is a Master of Sports Medicine through the University of Melbourne. It's all about continuing that learning process and everything I'm learning in that degree; I'm implementing it straight away which is great.

What kind of personal attributes and skills does this role require?
It is essential to be a good listener. You need to be able to hear each person and what they've gone through. You need to understand the significant emotional event that has occurred and sometimes that needs to be addressed before moving into the physical treatment phase. Once you've addressed that, you can go on the journey with them to improving their movement and minimise pain through an injury management plan. People skills are probably the most important skills as a physiotherapist
because, if you can’t talk to someone, they’re not going to effectively tell you what’s wrong with them, sometimes they may not even be sure themselves – something just doesn’t feel right or is giving them pain in some way. In the extreme, they may not let you interact with them physically because they don’t feel comfortable yet. You’ve got to be able to build that trust pretty quickly. If you aren’t able to quickly build rapport or that strong trust with your patient, they won’t open up to you and you can’t help them. Then your handling skills come with time and experience. The degree that you do will give you a stepping start into that a bit. Then you’ll be always adjusting and changing things based on your experiences and knowledge development.

What would you say would be the highlights and lowlights of your role?
Making a positive change for people is definitely a highlight. I think anyone who gets into physiotherapy or any kind of medical profession has a want to help people. The thrill of physiotherapy is really getting through the entire day exactly as you planned and as you wanted, and that everyone of your patients has improved and is on the right track. The one client session that you think you didn’t quite nail, that’s the one you think about for the rest of the day. The biggest thing for a physio is getting the right outcome each session and that you’re heading in the right direction. So yeah, it’s the feeling like you’ve made a change. With other places I’ve worked at before, you get in, do your work, and you go home and don’t get that enjoyment from the job. Whereas coming to work here makes you feel like you’re contributing to the community in some way. Lowlights? Yeah, there are some just like with any other job. Let’s say you didn’t nail that consultation or didn’t get that outcome you wanted; that’s a lowlight because you feel like you haven’t provided the service that you wanted. It’s a high-pressure job because people are paying to come see you, but extremely rewarding when you get it right. The hardest years are probably your first few years out of university because you’re the least experienced. Then once you’ve been in the industry for a while, you become much better and the role becomes a lot more enjoyable.

Tell me about your career journey?
My working life started at a supermarket stacking shelves when I was about fifteen. I did that for years but then I travelled overseas, and worked in England during a gap year. I didn’t have great marks coming out of year twelve funny enough, so I was a personal trainer for a while with a two-year Diploma of Fitness. Then I qualified for a Bachelor of Exercise Science which took me to Wollongong. It was a really good degree and set me up for my journey to become a physiotherapist. It was quite difficult and really taught me how to work hard. It was good that I had some life experience to bring with me into the course and my personal training experience meant I was able to work at the university gym on campus. From there, I came down to Melbourne University to complete a Doctor of Physiotherapy course. I wasn’t able to work as much during this course and I ended up having to work in retail for a little while, but it was selling fitness equipment so, kind-of related. I did that for a couple of years, graduated and went into physiotherapy. Since I’ve been in physiotherapy, I’ve tried to continue my learning and searched for the right working environment for me. This is a fantastic clinic here which is a great fit for me.

What would you say would be the biggest misconceptions of your role?
Many people think you make a lot of money as a physiotherapist and you don’t. I mean, you can but the average wage going around when compared to how much study we do is probably not what people expect. Lawyers and some business roles make a lot more money and they probably have more of a gradual set-up where you progress from level to level depending on time and experience. In a private practice setting, it’s really down to the practice owner and what they decide. There is no set levels of ‘you’ve done this so you can go to this level’. You’ve got to negotiate that as it comes up. I think most people in the healthcare industry work quite hard and don’t get as much reward as most people think.
Any other advice for someone who is contemplating physiotherapy as a career?
When it comes to clients, I think it’s important learn people’s personalities. I find a really good way is to mirror the patient. So, if they’re really loud and bubbly when they walk in, then you can be really loud and bubbly back to them, and they’ll interact well with that. But, if you notice that they’re a bit quiet and shy and you’re really crazy, bubbly or getting a bit too full-on; then they won’t react well to that. So, you’ve got to mirror them and their mood and if they’re an introvert so-to-speak, then you may need to be a little more direct and ask specific questions whereas other people want to chat about the footy game over the weekend or whatever it might be. Being able to identify personality-traits really quickly is really beneficial.

The other thing I find is that people will mirror you as well. So, if you as the physiotherapist is feeling a bit down and out, your patients will pick up on this and may feel uncomfortable. People often prefer to talk to someone who is happy. You’ve got to really make sure you put on your ‘game face’ and make sure that you’re in a good mindset which includes looking after yourself so you feel good and ready to work.

I think you’ve got to have a high work-ethic and a high level of self-motivation. If you don’t have that then private practice certainly won’t work for you. The hospital physiotherapy system is much more structured and could work for you still.

How do you feel like physiotherapy fits in with your work/life balance?
You’ve got to find a good clinic – some are better than others when it comes to work/life balance. If you go to a clinic that splits your shifts, makes you do a morning shift and then a night shift; it can make work/life balance difficult and there is a higher chance of burn-out. This may suit some people though.

This clinic is perfect for me. Our rostered hours are in one block, however the busiest times will always be in the evenings because people want to see you after work. That’s just part of the profession. But then you look at the positive side of that and realise you miss the traffic when you’re driving in and out of the city. I’m training for a marathon, still doing my running and getting that physical enjoyment around work hours.