



A Survey of Foreign-Educated Physical Therapists

This article is based on a presentation by Mark W. Cornwall, PT, PhD, FAPTA at the 2014 FSBPT Annual Meeting.

As a result of the discussions in the 2012 Leadership Issues Forum, FSBPT initiated a national survey of physical therapists practicing in the US but educated outside of the United States.

The survey was developed to document the demographics of foreign-educated physical therapists and to look at the challenges and obstacles they encounter in trying to join the US workforce.

In March 2014, the survey was sent to 9,334 individuals licensed in the US and identified by FSBPT as having been educated outside the US. The following month, survey responses began to be analyzed.

The results may eventually be used to inform regulatory decisions regarding the foreign-educated physical therapist. The raw results are educational.

The 22.4% response rate equaled 1,978 individuals. (About 5.3% of the email addresses, or 498, were invalid.) The breakdown was 63.5% female with mean age of 35.5 years and licensed in US 7.1 years; half had been US-licensed fewer than 6.2 years.

The majority of survey respondents were from the Philippines and India. The others (10%) were mainly from Europe. Most were educated in their home country, but 6% were educated outside their home country. The youngest group came from India.

Their reasons for coming to the US included improved safety, marriage to a US citizen, following family, advanced PT practice, better work conditions, adventure, and advanced education. They came from Africa, Asia, Canada, Europe, India, Middle East, Pacific Islands, Philippines, and South America.

Seventy-two percent spoke a language other than English as their primary language and more than half took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) from among the English proficiency exams. About 60-68% passed the exam on their first taking. Those from Asia and South America took it multiple times.

To become licensed and come to the US on average took 22 months; Canada was less than 10 months and Africa was more than 33 months. The mean was 21.4 months. Those licensed more than five years only took 16.8 months. Those licensed fewer than five years took 26.4 months.

From the time they took the National Physical Therapy Examination (NPTE) until they took their first job was as long as four years for those on temporary visas.

Those from Canada and the Pacific Islands took just more than one attempt to pass the NPTE.

Most are licensed in New York, then in the Midwest and Texas, California, and Florida.

Obstacles in becoming licensed:

- Obtaining a visa – Most difficult was for those from Asia, India, and the Philippines
- Credentialing process
- Passing the NPTE – Finding it the most difficult were from the Middle East and South America
- General education – India, Middle East, and Philippines found it most difficult
- Lack of knowledge
- Completing forms
- English proficiency
- Obtaining information
- Completing a Supervised Clinical Practice (SCP)
- Professional education
- Passing jurisprudence exam

Not all states require SCP and only 19.8% reported being required to complete an SCP. Filipino therapists were the least likely at 12.3%; African therapists were the most likely at 36.7%. After completing the SCP, 78.4% reported being offered employment. Those who felt the SCP was useful were from Asia, India, and the Philippines. They believed it mainly helped them understand billing and documentation and the US healthcare system.

Foreign-educated PTs primarily took their first job in the state in which they received their first license. Of the top eight states, New York had the largest concentration of first jobs, followed by Michigan, Florida, Indiana, Illinois, California, Texas, and Maryland.

New York has increased by 13.2% the number of foreign-educated PTs in the past five years. Seeing decreases were Michigan by 5.6% and Indiana by 3.7% in the same time period. Those educated in India seem to be going to Michigan for their first job.

The foreign-trained are looking primarily for a first job in a state where it is easier to be licensed, followed by a place where they can secure a visa sponsor, recruiter recommendation, and where they can meet the educational requirements. Hospitals are popular as the place of employment. Asian-educated were more likely to take jobs in a non-hospital outpatient facility. Those from India took jobs in non-hospital outpatient (OP) and skilled nursing facility (SNF), long-term care (LTC), and extended care facility (ECF). Pacific Islanders were most likely employed in non-hospital OP. Filipinos found work in SNF, LTC, and ECF.

A number of PTs from the Philippines (39.8%), Pacific Islands (32%), and India (29%) found more PT autonomy in their country of education than in the US. However, direct access to PT services was better in the US than their country of education for those from Africa (56.6%), Pacific Islands (56%), and Philippines (50.2%). Documentation requirements were better in the US for those from India (67%) and Middle East (64.7%).

All the foreign-educated PTs found understanding the US healthcare system to be significantly challenging during their first year of employment. No one from Asia thought this was very easy. PTs from the Middle East, India, and Asia found the complexity of insurance policies most challenging of the countries surveyed. Those from the Middle East found documenting correctly most challenging. And those from the U.K. don't understand why we bill.

To be fair, those born and educated in the US also find these four items challenging.

Asking if the decision to immigrate to the US to work as a PT was a good one for them, most were happy with their decision.



Mark W. Cornwall, PT, PhD, FAPTA received his bachelor's degree in Physical Therapy from the University of Maryland at Baltimore in 1977 and a PhD from Indiana University in 1986. He has been active in physical therapy education and research for more than 30 years. In addition, he has been active at both the local and national levels of the American Physical Therapy Association and has served on the Arizona Physical Therapy Board. He is currently a Professor of Physical Therapy in the Department of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training at Northern Arizona University.