

Imagining a BOLD Future for Musculoskeletal Care



Christopher McMullen
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Together, the specialty of PM&R BOLDLY discussed its future. AAPM&R enlisted the assistance of Musculoskeletal (MSK) physiatrists to envision the future of MSK aligned with the vision for physiatry.

That vision states that in the future... we see physiatry as the frontline partner with primary care for non-emergent musculoskeletal (MSK) care.

- Physiatrists will be available early and throughout the continuum of care to provide timely, cost-effective, coordinated care for all musculoskeletal complaints.
- From primary care to Orthopedics, physiatrists are essential in value-based patient care and directing rehabilitation and recovery across transitions in the care continuum.
- As there is an increased demand for physiatry from patient groups, primary care providers, and health care systems, new physiatry-led models of practice will become more common (i.e., PM&R located with primary care, comprehensive physiatry-led MSK centers, etc.)

We recently spoke with Christopher McMullen, MD, FAAPMR, an early-career physiatrist working within a neighborhood clinic alongside primary care physicians from the University of Washington. This unique opportunity became available to him based on the work of the Sports and Spine group at the university to ensure that physiatry is included earlier in patient care.

"My vision for the clinic and the Academy's envisioned future model for MSK care are perfectly aligned in that we both believe that physiatrists should be on the frontline when it comes to MSK care because physiatrists, by nature, are best equipped to handle patients of any age and any ability level," said Dr. McMullen.

Dr. McMullen is employing this model daily in his practice. "I work with primary care providers, we sit next to each other, and I'm able to see their patients right away, often at the initial visit. This early intervention allows me to capture patients early on in their care, and to be able to manage all aspects of their musculoskeletal care from initial diagnosis through final outcome," stated Dr. McMullen.

A core tenant of the vision for physiatry—getting physiatrists involved early and often across the care continuum—is where Dr. McMullen believes our field should go in the future in order to provide timely, cost-effective, coordinated care for all musculoskeletal complaints. "The idea to put a physiatrist into our neighborhood clinics, into our primary care clinics, has been years in the making. We as physiatrists have wanted to do this and expand into a greater area, as well as see

patients earlier in their care," explained Dr. McMullen. "We want to be out in the community and be able to access these patients earlier, rather than have them come to a central hub and wait for specific care that only a specialist can provide."

Primary care physicians can also benefit from this new envisioned futures model, as Dr. McMullen explains. "I'm right there with them. I have the primary care provider walking with me asking a question about an image or a case, or just to bounce an idea off me. Our relationship is really close and they really appreciate it."

When a physiatrist is included in the care-team, everyone can work more efficiently. "When the primary care provider can get their patients in-front of a specialist sooner, it's a big value-add for them," explained Dr. McMullen. "They don't have to jump through hurdles to get their patients seen by a specialist, which can sometimes take 2 months. I'm right there and this benefits everyone, including the patients."

Patients also appreciate being able to interact with a specialist very early on. "They see their primary care doctor and within a week, or even the same day, they're seeing me and patients love that," said Dr. McMullen. "I'm better able to steer them in the right direction sooner. So whether that's a diagnostic evaluation or a referral to a surgeon or a physical therapist, I can get them into that process earlier on; and that's really appreciated by patients."

This team-based care throughout a patient's treatment helps demonstrate physiatry's value to the health system. "We have to demonstrate what we are providing to the system—not only decreasing inappropriate referrals and scans—but more so by getting patients to the appropriate specialist sooner, we are saving costs to the system," explained Dr. McMullen. "The fact that we're able to collaborate with other providers and have other providers on-board within this collaborative care model, illustrates physiatry's value to the system as a whole."

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