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# Educating Physical Therapists Context, Challenges, and Opportunities

## CONTEXT: THE FIRST 50 YEARS

Physical therapy as a health care practice in the United States had its beginnings in the late 19th century as unlicensed personnel with backgrounds in exercise and other forms of physical agents, joined with teams of physicians and nurses to treat people affected by the polio epidemics of that era. Then, in 1918 the Office of the US Surgeon General of the Army authorized formation of Reconstruction Aides who entered 3-month training programs to meet the therapeutic needs of soldiers serving in World War I.<sup>1,2</sup>

The timing of physical therapy's emergence benefited from reforms in medicine and nursing that just preceded the origins of physical therapy. At the beginning of the 1900s, medicine and nursing were both characterized by a great variability in practice that many leaders in the field considered to be dangerous to public health. The *1910 Flexner Report*,<sup>3</sup> commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation, coupled with formation of the Council of Medical Education of the American Medical Association, led to a structure with the scientific basis of medical education occurring within institutions of higher education, and clinical training occurring in academic medical centers and hospitals. By 1927, this structure was truly standardized with universal licensure of physicians.<sup>4-8</sup> The nursing profession followed a similar, but later, trajectory than medicine. *The Goldmark Report of 1923*,<sup>9</sup> commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, set criteria for both the practice of nursing in various settings, and the education of nurses, placing nursing education on a path out of hospital-based training and into institutions of higher education. Universal mandatory nursing licensure with an education requirement occurred in the 1940s.<sup>10-12</sup>

Physical therapy began as a profession in the United States just as medicine and nursing were turning their attention to standardizing education and practice, thereby benefiting from the work done in those fields. Mary McMillan led the development of educational programs to prepare