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## OU offering new PT doctoral program

By Vivian DeGain, Contributing Writer

Like the medical and nursing professions, the field of physical therapy is growing to meet greater demands. The number of people in the aging baby-boomer population who need such services is growing. And new professional standards are being set by the organizations that accredit universities and the degree programs they offer. These trends toward increased professionalism led to a brand new Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree program in OU's **School of Health Sciences** (SHS). SHS also offers the DScPT for students who already hold a master's degree. OU is offering the new degree programs for the first time this semester.

The new DPT program has three goals: to provide an educational program that prepares students for a professional career in physical therapy; to provide opportunities for the advancement of knowledge in physical therapy through research; and to provide service to the public through continuing education and expertise.

The new DPT will meet newly established guidelines by the American Physical Therapy Association and the Council for the Accreditation for Physical Therapy Education, calling for physical therapists to be educated at the doctoral level, said SHS Dean Ron Olson.

"The DPT will allow physical therapists to be better diagnosticians, allowing for accurate rapid diagnosis and the development of better treatment plans, as well as giving the DPT candidates more academic enrichment," Olson said.

In earning the DPT, the physical therapist will gain a broader range of clinical skills and practice. Patients then will enjoy a more streamlined course of therapy. Currently in Michigan and in other states, a physician must diagnose a patient's condition and write a prescription before the patient can receive treatment from a PT. A bill currently making its way through the Michigan legislature would allow PTs to evaluate and treat patients without physician referral, if passed. DPT and DScPT graduates will be well prepared to do so.

The DPT will require additional skills and learning.

"We hadn't been teaching students to read X-rays in the past, for instance, but now the DPT program does," Olson said.

The biggest change for students, Olson said, is that now, candidates will first earn a BS (typically a four-year degree) and then the DPT (a three-year program), requiring seven years in all. Before, they would have completed six years just to earn a master's degree.

Professional change and challenge are not strangers to PT students, Olson said. Health sciences students already have higher educational and degree expectations, and know how to manage them successfully. Typically, academic requirements to earn a Bachelor of Science degree are 140 credit hours, which exceed the typical Bachelor of Arts degree requirements for 120 credit hours. The new DPT requires 210 credit hours, while the former terminal degree, a master's in physical therapy required 187 hours.

"Our students are very goal-oriented. They come to health sciences with a specific profession in mind, and a determination to complete the course and work in the field. They want to excel and they work to excel. Our students want the DPT because they see it as the top goal, the brass ring of the profession," Olson said.

Beth Marcoux, director of the OU physical therapy program, said the new DPT is a better way of acknowledging the extra work that students already have been doing.

"This change more accurately reflects the accomplishments of the students, similar to other clinical designations, such as the PharmD or doctoral of pharmacy," Marcoux said.

The changes are not yet mandated by the accreditation agencies, but "strongly suggested," and Marcoux said the strength will be "in that the DPT requires students to have earned a BS; they will come into the terminal program with a better background in basic sciences."

To learn the necessary skills of physical therapy, "evaluation, prevention and treatment of movement disorders," students must gain specific knowledge of basic and applied medical sciences, including biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, anatomy, physiology, kinesiology and pathology. Students also learn behavioral sciences to provide them with basic knowledge and understanding to develop interpersonal relationships with patients, families and other health professionals.

"The doctoral program provides a more complete and comprehensive education, and gives students more time in the classroom and in the field," said OU instructor Kristine Thompson, PhD, PT. "It also provides more time to do academic work as well as work in the clinical setting."

Only six DPT programs are accredited in Michigan: Oakland University, University of Michigan- Flint, Wayne State University, Grand Valley State, Central Michigan University and Andrews University.

For more information about the PT program, call (248) 370-4041 or visit the **School of Health Sciences** Web site.

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