

The Critical Role of Respiratory Therapists

Q&A WITH MIKE HESS, MPH, RRT, RPFT



Q. What is a respiratory therapist and why are they necessary?

Respiratory therapists are allied health professionals who specialize in the respiratory system. We help people with asthma, COPD, cystic fibrosis and other chronic respiratory conditions. We also help patients with acute illnesses like pneumonia or patients on ventilators in the intensive care unit. We help patients learn how to use their respiratory equipment and medications. And we generally have a unique depth of knowledge ranging from physiology to pharmacology.

Q. What do you wish patients and clinicians knew about respiratory therapists?

I wish they knew that we existed and could be of service outside of hospital settings. Because of current practices and policies, many patients don't encounter us until they're in the hospital with critical respiratory needs. If there was more awareness about our role, we could help in primary care and pulmonary offices, spending crucial time with patients before serious incidents.

Q. What is the respiratory therapist's role in a patient's care team?

We help define the patient's care plan from their time in the hospital through outpatient care. In the hospital we monitor breathing, ventilators, medications, oxygen levels and other vitals. When patients transition out of the hospital, we can help write some of their care plans and coordination with equipment. And in outpatient settings, we provide a range of services such as pulmonary function tests, homecare assessments, tobacco cessation and more. We seek to provide care throughout the patient journey.



Q. What are the biggest challenges to accessing respiratory therapist services?

The biggest barriers to accessing our services are location and awareness. If you live in a city or heavily populated area, you're more likely to encounter us in clinical settings as a part of routine care management. But for people in rural areas, they are more likely to encounter us in the emergency room when conditions worsen.

Q. What can policymakers do to increase access to respiratory therapists?

Policymakers can support legislation such as the Supplemental Oxygen Access Reform, or SOAR Act. This legislation would help people get better access to medical oxygen and allow medical equipment companies to get reimbursed for in-home respiratory services under Medicare Part B. There is also other legislation that would support virtual pulmonary rehabilitation, where patients can be seen right from their homes. Generally, lawmakers can support better allocation of respiratory therapists.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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