

This document is written from the perspective of licensed athletic trainers who served on the regulatory board. As part of their role, they are commonly asked to address questions related to the athletic training scope of practice. This document can be used by athletic trainers and other regulatory boards to assist in making decisions on athletic training scope of practice.

Over the past two decades, athletic training education has grown in uniformity, breadth and depth as the profession streamlined the educational preparation of athletic trainers.¹⁻² In addition, athletic training practice has continued to grow and evolve, resulting in dynamic changes in practice setting and practice skill. This change is demonstrated in the latest Role Delineation Study/Practice Analysis and its changed structure and content.³

Questions about scope of practice tend to fall into one of the two categories: (1) “Turf battles” between two or more professions; or (2) Litigation or questions of negligent practice.

The turf battle scenario refers to the all too common question of “my practice includes this skill so it can’t be part of yours.” Healthcare practice has developed in such a way that most professions today share some skills or procedures with other professions. In fact, the breath of athletic training education makes this a guaranteed proposition. It is no longer reasonable to expect each profession to have a completely unique scope of practice, exclusive of all others. Regulatory boards should reflect this reality, and view scope of practice issues in context of the evolution of abilities of each other’s discipline.

Litigation or adjudication related questions about scope of practice should address the education and training of the individual in question, as well as the general educational scope of educational preparation and continuing education practices for the profession of athletic training. For example, although an athletic training task might be part of the athletic training scope of practice, if the individual athletic trainer is not personally competent in the task, they should not perform the activity.

This document tries to provide a rational and useful way to make decisions when considering scope of practice issues, which is focused primarily on client/public safety. The central questions regulatory boards and athletic training professionals must wrestle with is whether a professional is both trained to provide and can execute a proposed service in a safe and effective manner. In the end, regulation of practice, according to Schmitt and Shimberg, is intended to:

- * Ensure that the public is protected from unscrupulous, incompetent and unethical practitioners;
- * Offer some assurance to the public that the regulated individual is competent to provide certain services in a safe and effective manner; and
- * Provide a means by which individuals who fail to comply with the profession’s standards can be disciplined, including the revocation of their licenses.⁴

Making Decisions Related to Scope of Practice

Questions of whether a task is within the athletic training scope of practice should probe the following four areas:

- A. Is the task represented in entry level education and practice?
- B. Has the practitioner had continuing education to adequately prepare them to perform the task?
- C. Is the task specifically prohibited in the state's laws and rules?
- D. Does this task provide for safety and welfare of the client?

This foundation should provide the framework for analyzing and determining if a task is within one's "personal" scope of athletic training practice. If the professional can provide supporting evidence that adequately addresses these four areas, then the task is considered within that athletic trainer's scope of athletic training practice. There are questions following each of these areas to provide a framework for decision making regarding scope of practice. Not all of these questions need to be satisfied; however, each of these four areas need to be satisfied to determine if a skill is in one's scope of practice.

A. Entry level education and practice:

Is this skill taught in accredited entry level athletic training educational programs? Is the content clearly found in current/historic practice and therefore commonly considered practice by entry level practitioners? This is the most simple of the criteria. If this task is currently part of the entry level competencies and/or the current Role Delineation Study, then the task is part of entry level athletic training practice and therefore clearly in the scope of practice of the athletic trainer.

Questions to be considered to determine if an advanced skill is within an individual's scope of practice:

1. Are these skills part of the current Role Delineation Study
2. Does current entry-level education prepare practitioners to perform this skill as their experience increases?
3. Is it possible that the knowledge and skills currently tested on the entry-level BOC exam?

B. Continuing Education and Training

Tasks added to scopes of practice are often skills learned through professional training in advanced skills. Over time, a practitioner's scope of practice increases as they learn and become competent in advanced skills. This expands their individual scope of practice. There should be appropriate accredited post-professional training programs and competence assessment tools that indicate whether the practitioner is competent to perform the advanced skill safely; once this is accomplished, the athletic trainer's personal scope of practice is expanded.

If over time a sufficient number of professionals acquire and use a particular new skill, the role delineation study reflects their value and use within professional practice. As such, years later they may become entry-level skills and would be taught as such in entry-level curricula. It is not realistic to require a skill or activity be taught in an entry-level program before it becomes part of a professional's scope of practice. If this were the standard, there would be few, if any, increases in individual's scope of practice.

Questions to be considered to determine if an advanced skill is within an individual's scope of practice:

1. What training program(s) were attended to learn the new skill or technique?
2. Was the time spent adequate to acquire the skill?
3. Does the program meet the standards and criteria established for these types of programs?
4. How is competence determined through the advanced skill program?
5. What are the measures of competence used by the program and what is the validity of these measures?
6. Is there evidence within the profession related to the particular procedures and skills involved in the changes in scope?
7. Does the professional include clinical evidence/research validating this technique?
8. Is there evidence that the procedure or skill is beneficial to client care?

C. Prohibited in the state regulation

In many cases, the item that most restricts a profession's scope of practice is the state's practice act itself. Many state practice acts restrict an individual's scope of practice to prevent the performance of even some tasks that are considered as entry-level or otherwise common to the profession. Others state practice acts prohibit certain techniques or practice settings. Some state's limit certain practices to only be performed by specified licensed professionals. Examples of these kinds of restrictions include the performance of surgery, administration of injectable drugs, etc.

Questions to be considered in this area include:

1. Is the expanded scope clearly prohibited by the practice act?
2. Is the practice clearly prohibited by the state practice act of another profession?

D. Does this task provide for safety and welfare of the client?

Ultimately, the primary responsibility and obligation of state athletic training boards is to protect consumers of athletic training services. If the task puts the public in harm's way due to unprofessional, improper and incompetent training of athletic training, then the task is outside the scope of athletic training.

1. The History and Evolution of Athletic Training Education in the United States, Delforge G, Behnke R., *J Athl Train.* 1999 Jan-Mar; 34(1): 53–61.
2. *Far Beyond the Shoe Box: Fifty Years of the National Athletic Trainers' Association.* Ebel R. Forbes; 1st edition (1999).
3. Board of Certification. (2010). *The 2009 Athletic Trainer Role Delineation Study.* Omaha, NE: Stephen B. Johnson.
4. *Demystifying Occupational and Professional Regulation: Answers to Questions You May Have Been Afraid to Ask,* Schmitt, K. and Shimberg, B. Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation, 1996.