As physical therapy insurance reimbursement declines, therapists must look for new income sources. Many clinicians are finding lucrative returns with cash-based Pilates classes for individuals or groups.

With low-impact exercises designed to increase flexibility, agility, strength and core strength, Pilates has long been recognized as a versatile rehabilitation tool.

But since the late 1990s, it’s also become a fast-growing form of fitness in the United States and Canada. From 2001 to 2003, North American participation increased from 2.1 million people to 9.4 million in 2003, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturer’s Association.

Brent Anderson, PT, OCS, spotted the trend early. In 1992, he founded Polestar Education, a Pilates training and certification organization, and Polestar Pilates Center, a Pilates Rehab, fitness and training institute now based in Miami, Fla. Polestar Pilates Center offers cash-based classes on the mat and Allegro Reformer.

Between group classes, rehab and personal training sessions, Polestar caters to approximately 140 people daily.

Anderson plans to expand the center to accommodate a rehab wing and a therapy residency program where physical therapists and doctors can receive complimentary Pilates training.

Hiring quality instructors is a key part of the process. “To be successful, you’ve got to have excellent teachers,” Anderson says. “A center might get people to pay cash-only at the onset, but if they don’t get a great result they won’t come back and pay cash again.”

Martha Williams, PT, also believes instructors have helped her Pilates practice flourish in Vacaville, Calif. Since its inception in 1990, Sports Rehab Physical Therapy has grown from an 800-square foot facility to 6,000 square feet. Williams offered cash-based classes in 2002, but the program didn’t take off until last year, when she reduced class prices and hired an instructor with marketing savvy.

Now, Williams offers seven group reformer classes daily, three days a week, as well as private sessions.

Denise Montagne, PT, owner of Dynamic Movement Physical Therapy in Reno, Nev., initially had problems marketing a Pilates program. But after placing radio ads, and pitching the program’s merits to her regional physical therapy association, Montagne received referrals from physical therapists who weren’t trained in core stabilization.

Today her Pilates program features cash-based mat classes and personal training sessions.

Although these cash-based practices differ in size and specialties, they’re seeing rewards from long-term investments.

With increased health insurance costs, decreased coverage, and a con-
cerns about health care quality, clients are searching for quality fitness programs. Many are willing to pay cash for effective outcomes.

With Pilates programs, patients and clients gain the benefits of strength, flexibility and balance. In turn, a practice can enjoy sustained growth and profitability.

Dave Littman is director of development for Balanced Body in Sacramento, Calif.