



The Washington State Academy of Physician Assistants

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Five Facts about the PA Profession

1 Physician assistants (PAs) work in physician-directed teams collaborating as needed with physicians to provide high-quality patient care.

PAs are required by law to have a supervising physician. However, this supervision does not mean direct visualization of every patient a PA sees, but rather collaborative teamwork and delegated decision-making. A PA works autonomously within a particular scope of practice to care for patients and are legally responsible for their own actions. In many rural areas, a PA may be the only health provider in a clinic, with the supervising physician in another area and only available by phone or telecommunications. The PA works as a physician extender, providing high quality, competent, team-based care.¹

2 PA curriculum follows the medical school model, and students accrue over 2,000 hours in patient care during their rotations. Upon graduation, most PAs earn a master's level degree.

Most PA programs require at least 1,000 hours of prior health care experience before a student can apply. Their health care experience can be varied. Applicants include: nurses, paramedics and military corpsmen/medics. Upon the completion of the program, students will have mastered diagnostic reasoning, lab and x-ray interpretations and the ability to correctly treat patients with pharmaceuticals. Rotations include specialties such as surgery, emergency medicine, psychiatry, rural/underserved medicine, inpatient medicine and family medicine. PA students are often trained along-side medical students in the medical model of diagnosis and treatment and continue to collaborate with physicians once they graduate.²

3 PAs are able to evaluate, diagnose, prescribe medications and treat medical conditions in inpatient and outpatient settings. PAs are not only found in primary care, but in most medical and surgical specialties.

PAs are nationally certified and licensed to practice medicine and prescribe medications in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. PAs in Washington receive their own DEA certificate number allowing them to prescribe medications including controlled substances.¹

4 The PA profession consistently ranks high in national rankings of best jobs in America and more specifically, in healthcare.

US News and World Report rankings consistently tout the PA profession as a top job due to high job satisfaction, demand in the market and flexibility. Forbes also places PAs as a top profession and employment opportunities are projected to increase by 30% over the next ten years.^{3,4}

5 PAs consistently provide high quality care with the potential to help overcome the physician shortage, particularly in primary care.

Multiple studies have shown, both in specialty and primary care, that PAs provide quality care and increase physician efficiency. This leads to a better, more collaborative team that reduces errors, decrease admission rates and provides better, less expensive care. These are all important measures that determine both reimbursement and government funding, particularly with Medicare patients.^{5,6}

OF INTEREST:

The PA profession was created by physicians in the mid 1960's. Most notable is Eugene Stead, MD, who in 1965, started the Duke PA program. He took four former Navy Corpsman into his 2-year program. Three of the candidates graduated in 1967 and were the first PAs in the US.

In 1969 the University of Washington MEDEX Program was started by Richard Smith, MD.

PA programs are expanding internationally. Netherland was the first to adopt PAs in 2001 followed by Canada, United Kingdom, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand. New programs have been developed for military service in Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Ghana and Germany.

Source: The Physician Assistant: An Illustrated History, 2013

References:

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