

SPECIALTY PRACTICE

ISSUE BRIEF



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

Physician assistants' (PAs) versatility and interpersonal skills are well-suited to the multifaceted demands of occupational medicine. As part of physician-led teams, PAs promote employee health by treating occupational injuries and illnesses, establishing immunization programs, providing health and safety education and expanding health maintenance activities. PAs deliver health services in diverse settings, including corporate medical offices, occupational medicine clinics and clinics for production plants or mines.

PAs are licensed health care professionals who provide medical care with physician supervision. PAs are educated in intensive programs accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant. The average PA program is 27 months and is characterized by a rigorous, competency-based curriculum with both didactic and clinical components.¹ Programs are located in medical schools, colleges and universities, teaching hospitals and through the US Armed Services.

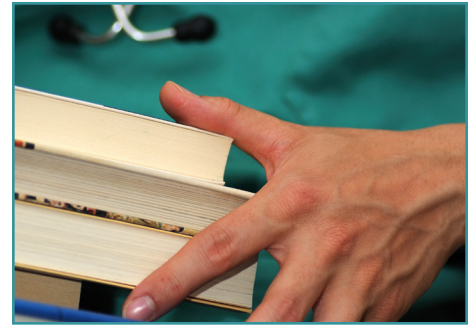
All states, the District of Columbia and the majority of US territories

authorize PAs to practice. In those jurisdictions and in many federal agencies, physicians may delegate to PAs medical duties that are within the physician's scope of practice, the PA's training and experience and that are allowed by law. After graduation, PAs must pass a national certifying examination before they can be licensed. To maintain certification, PAs must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and take a recertification examination every six years.

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occupational medicine. PAs are ideal coordinators of employee wellness programs, which contribute to the overall productivity and success of the workplace. The preventive care orientation of occupational medicine also corresponds well to the values of the PA profession.

PAS IN ACTION

AAPA's Jennifer Anne Hohman interviewed leading PAs in occupational medicine. The following accounts from these interviews illustrate PA range and versatility in the workplace.

PA FILLS DIVERSE ROLES WITH OCCUPATIONAL MED COMPANY

A PA working for Mercy Occupational Health — a clinic providing occupational medicine services to a diverse range of employers, including General Motors, Wal-Mart, Lear Jet, local school districts and service industry employers — treats patients with a variety of work-related injuries, including strains, lacerations and repetitive stress ailments. After diagnosis, the PA equips employees with detailed written instructions on all aspects of their recovery, including the use of prescribed medications and how to best protect injured areas against further damage. She consults with managers about lighter duty

assignments while employees are healing and conducts follow-up visits to ensure a full and well-coordinated recovery.

The PA also administers a range of pre-placement physicals for employers, including drug screenings and fitness tests tailored to reflect the physical demands of the employees' work. In addition, she performs DOT physicals for employers such as the local school district and FedEx.

Additionally, the PA works off-site at a laboratory equipment factory four hours a week, thereby increasing patient access to care. The physician is available for consultation by phone if necessary while the PA sees the workers, many of whom have no other medical provider. By answering their medical questions and providing general health education, the PA helps keep the factory workers well and able to work in a physically demanding setting.

PA CARE AT LOS ALAMOS

The workers and researchers of Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory receive their occupational health services from a PA. This PA specializes in the prevention, diagnosis and referral of radiation-related conditions. To help Los Alamos fulfill strict Occupational

Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations concerning radiation exposure, he conducts rigorous medical exams for employees on a yearly basis. The PA also treats the researchers who travel to remote locations and return with illnesses related not only to radiation exposure but also more common problems such as gastrointestinal ailments. A physician is always on-site at the facility and coordinates care with the PA.

PA VERSATILITY AT NEW YORK PRESBYTERIAN HOSPITAL

A PA employed by New York Presbyterian Hospital treats a diverse population of hospital employees and Cornell University researchers. Her scope of work ranges from pre-placement exams to developing preventive worker safety measures. In conducting pre-placement examinations for hospital employment candidates, she tests for TB, illegal substances and HIV, and she gauges applicants' physical fitness to perform job duties. This PA also serves as a main contact person for employees struggling with addiction; she helps them find treatment options and refers them to drug and alcohol treatment centers.

As a certified New York state HIV educator, the PA at New York

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Presbyterian Hospital conducts employee safety training for hospital employees at risk for HIV exposure through blood or body fluid exposure. This PA also leads a program addressing the special health needs of Cornell researchers working in a Biosafety Level 3 Lab. In the lab, researchers are exposed to a variety of health risks — including rare viruses — through contact with lab animals. To protect against these hazards, the PA planned and implemented lab safety measures in cooperation with laboratory directors, hospital officials and the New York State Department of Health.

CDC EMPLOYS PAs IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

At the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a PA cares for researchers who typically spend a month at a time in disease outbreak areas around the world. His practice combines travel medicine with infectious disease medicine. Researchers generally return with at least one ailment, ranging in seriousness from digestive problems to malaria. One of the PA's specialty areas is the testing of researchers' fitness for the use of physically demanding protective gear. He conducts cardiopulmonary tests to gauge employees' fitness to handle gear used in highly toxic environments and, working closely with his supervising physician, he coordinates the annual bioterrorism fitness exams for CDC researchers.

Another significant patient base consists of CDC office workers who typically suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome and similar repetitive stress injuries. In these cases, the PA collaborates with the CDC's industrial hygienist to restructure employees' workstations along ergonomic standards and trains employees in preventive measures against repetitive stress.

STATE DEPARTMENT COUNTS ON PA RESOURCEFULNESS

The U.S. Department of State employs PAs in occupational medicine to provide medical care to State Department employees and their families overseas. For example, a PA at the State Department manages family medicine as well as emergency medical crises.

Additionally, he serves as the medical liaison between employees and host country medical personnel and facilities, and he inspects local hospitals to determine their quality of care. In countries where acceptable inpatient care is not available, he has developed alternate sites where patients can be stabilized prior to airlift to hospital.

FEDERAL POLICIES

PAs are employed in occupational medicine roles by numerous federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. OSHA recognizes PAs as qualified occupational medicine

providers who can “perform physical examinations, identify health problems and plan therapeutic interventions.” In addition, the U.S. DOT allows PAs to perform and sign truck driver physicals. The regulations identify the responsibilities of the medical examiner in performing and recording the physical examination (49 CFR, Part 391.43) and define PAs as medical examiners.

PA REIMBURSEMENT

Individual states either determine the rules regarding PA coverage for services or they defer to insurance companies — which provide coverage under the auspices of the state workers' compensation program — regarding policies covering PAs.

AAPA collects information about coverage policies for services provided by PAs and supervision requirements under state workers' compensation programs. View this information at www.aapa.org/advocacy-and-practice-resources/reimbursement/workers-compensation/622. To ensure accuracy, always contact your state workers' compensation program directly. (The workers' compensation program for federal employees, however, does not cover services provided by PAs; AAPA staff, leaders and members are working to change that federal policy.)

CONCLUSION

Healthy employees are productive employees. Working together, physician-PA teams are able to coordinate the various players in the occupational health landscape — employer, employee, management and government regulators — in the service of employee health and productivity. The continuity of care afforded by physician-PA teams helps workers stay well and on the job.

For additional information on PAs in occupational medicine, please visit AAPA's Web site at www.aapa.org, or contact AAPA's Jennifer Anne Hohman at 703-836-2272 ext. 3220 or



jhohman@aapa.org. Information is also available from the American Academy of Physician Assistants in Occupational Medicine at www.aapa.org/spec/AAPAOM, or you can contact the office at 800-596-4398 or aapaom@aapa.org.

REFERENCES

1. Physician Assistant Education Association. (2007–2008). *Twenty-fourth annual report on physician assistant educational programs in the United States*. Alexandria, VA.



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