

SPECIALTY PRACTICE

ISSUE BRIEF



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS IN PRIMARY CARE

Physician assistants (PAs) offer continuity, comprehensiveness and coordination of care, all vital components of the medical home. As Dr. Hauer states in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “traditional practice...is shifting to collaborative models that include physicians from multiple specialties, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and other health professionals. This primary care paradigm will enable professionals to adapt to the changing demographics and needs of patients seeking primary care.”¹

PAs are licensed 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. Programs are characterized by a rigorous competency-based curriculum with didactic and clinical components. This education prepares PA students to practice with physicians in any specialty.

Today there are nearly 75,000 PAs in clinical practice; 36 percent (27,000) practice in primary care specialties.² The profession’s flexibility — a relatively

short, academically intense educational pipeline producing well-prepared generalist medical clinicians — is an asset for a health system with rapidly changing priorities.

PA SCOPE OF PRACTICE

PA scope of practice is defined by education, experience, state law, facility/practice policy and physician delegation.

PA licensing laws and regulations are broadly written to allow maximum flexibility at the practice level. These

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laws leave most delegatory decisions to the supervising physician. In all states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam, physicians may delegate prescriptive privileges to the PAs they supervise. The majority of states include controlled medications as part of this prescriptive authority. All laws allow off-site physician supervision as long as they are available to the PA via telecommunication.

PAs provide medical care, consult with supervising physicians and colleagues, and refer patients to specialists when necessary. PAs perform physical examinations, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret lab tests, and provide patient education. They prescribe medications, manage patients with chronic conditions, perform minor surgical procedures and make rounds at nursing homes and hospitals.

Research consistently finds that PAs provide care equivalent in quality to that of physicians and are widely accepted by patients.³⁻⁶

PA ROLES IN PRIMARY CARE

PAs in primary care treat diverse patient groups — the elderly, children and families, the underserved and veterans — in varied settings.

CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

Many PAs treat elderly patients: 90 percent of all PAs report caring for persons aged 65-84 years, and 80 percent care for patients 85 years old and older.² PA graduates are well-grounded in geriatric care. Accreditation standards require that PA programs provide students with clinical experiences in the long-term care setting and in geriatrics.

In Durham, N.C., PAs care for 300 low-income seniors in Duke's "Just for Us" program. The PAs are part of a multidisciplinary team providing primary care house calls. The visits are key to Duke's medical home approach to family medicine.⁷

In the northeastern US, two PAs provide care at a 360-bed skilled nursing facility. The supervising geriatrician and other physicians come in three times a week. Having the PAs available provides continuity of care and helps reduce hospitalizations.⁸

CARING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The breadth of PA education creates clinicians who are well-suited to the challenges of family practice. Eighty percent of PAs in family medicine report

that they care for newborns, 85 percent see babies and older children and 95 percent treat adolescents.²

Twenty-five years ago, two physicians who shared a philosophy of serving patients where they lived created a family practice near Puget Sound, Wash. Today, the practice has 15 physicians, 10 PAs and two nurse practitioners (NPs) providing care in three locations to 27,000 patients a year. The PAs provide comprehensive care at three offices and cover two urgent care facilities that have evening and weekend hours.⁹

CARING FOR THE UNDERSERVED

PAs care for medically underserved populations, such as frontier communities, rural towns, the urban poor and at-risk groups such as the elderly. Federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) are a mainstay for under- and uninsured patients. Nearly 20 percent of PAs in primary care (6,000 PAs) work in urban and rural FQHCs, community health centers and certified rural health clinics.²

A native resident of Tangier Island in Virginia graduated from PA school in 2006 and became the island's first full-time medical professional. For

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years, the island's 600 residents were served by mainland physicians and PAs who traveled there once a week. The physicians still supervise and visit, but since the PA lives on the island, care is more readily accessible.¹⁰

In Alaska, one PA who was born and raised in a Yupik/Aleut family provides care at a regional hospital serving 56 villages. "They call me 'the doctor' or 'our Native doctor'," she says. "I tell them that I'm not a doctor, but they disregard that. They know that I'm not a doctor of medicine, but I think that in their eyes, I am their doctor."¹¹



admissions, orders consults and coordinates the patients' medical needs. (AAPA interview)

A team of seven physicians, 10 PAs and two NPs staff the primary care medicine clinics of one Pennsylvania VAMC. One PA on the team says she enjoys the variety in her work and the flexibility she has had to practice in other specialty areas within the center. In addition, she conducts exams for the Agent Orange and Gulf War registries, assignments that required specialized training. (AAPA interview)

CARING FOR OUR NATION'S VETERANS

The first PA graduates were former medical corpsmen who served in Vietnam. This veteran/PA connection continues today. PA programs currently recruit medics who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, and PA graduates provide medical care in Iraq and Afghanistan as active duty service members.

A psychiatric nursing home unit of a Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in Kansas hired a PA with seven years of internal medicine experience. On a typical day, after rounds with the treatment team, the PA performs

A PA began practicing in a small West Virginia town 30 years ago, when the town had no resident physician; the last full-time physician practiced there in the 1960s. Even today, the nearest full-time doctor is 16 miles away. The clinic sees 6,000 patients a year; 20 percent are indigent and nearly 40 percent are uninsured.¹²

Horizon Healthcare, Inc., has 10 community health centers across South Dakota that provide primary care for all ages. The staff includes six physicians, 10 PAs, four dentists and three NPs. All the PAs are family medicine providers and their clinical interests include emergency medicine, prevention, geriatrics, cancer awareness and women's health.¹³

THE PA ANSWER

PAs are high-quality, cost-effective members of primary care. Their generalist education, grounding in team practice and ability to expand access to care make them ideal practitioners for the needs of 21st century health care. For more information about PA education and scope of practice, visit AAPA's Resources page at www.aapa.org/advocacy-and-practice-resources/issue-briefs.

CARING FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

Nationally, 15 percent of all PAs practice in rural areas, and often the PA is the only medical provider in the community.²

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