



As Physicians Deal with Growing Demand, Physician-PA Teams Key to Meeting New Challenges

A Mayo Clinic study published by the *Archives of Internal Medicine*¹ in August 2012 found that nearly half of physicians struggle with burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and “a tendency to view patients as objects instead of as people.” Running a successful medical practice while maintaining anything approximating a healthy work-life balance is becoming increasingly difficult. Factors contributing to the pressures include growing and aging patient populations, increasingly complex treatment options, patients more apt to believe what they read online than what they hear from their medical provider, pressures to be almost inhumanly efficient (often at the expense of taking time to deliver compassionate care), falling reimbursement rates, and the constant threat of litigation.

Yet many physicians are able to keep their heads above water, maintain a healthy work-life balance, and even lead the practices they envisioned as young medical students. For me and many other physicians, the key is developing a high-functioning team, and perhaps no team configuration has greater potential to impact a physician’s practice than the physician-PA team. Physician assistants (PAs) are an integral part of today’s healthcare team with good reason: the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) projects there will be a shortage of approximately 125,000 doctors by the year 2025.² Dr. Atul Grover, chief advocacy officer at AAMC, stated that this will be the first time since the 1930s that the ratio of physicians to the population will begin to decline.

To add fuel to that fire, three emerging issues may create an even greater problem. First, a significant percentage of American physicians are of retirement age. In 2009, the Association of American

¹Shanafelt TD, Boone S, Tan L, et al. Burnout and Satisfaction With Work-Life Balance Among US Physicians Relative to the General US Population. *Arch Intern Med*. Published online August 20, 2012. doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2012.3199.

² Association of American Medical Colleges “Workforce Issues in Health Care Reform: Assessing the Present and Preparing for the Future” March 2009.

Medical Colleges reported that *more than a third* of physicians were age 55 or older and likely to retire in the coming decade.³

Like physicians, the rest of the population is graying as well; the number of Americans over the age of 65 will double between 2000 and 2030.⁴The unprecedented growth of the American senior population will place an equally extraordinary demand on the healthcare system. In 2010, while chair of American Medical Association, Dr. Ardis Dee Hoven provided stark statistics on that point: "By age 65, around two-thirds of all seniors have at least one chronic disease and see seven physicians. Twenty percent of those older than 65 have five or more chronic diseases, see 14 physicians and average 40 doctor visits per year."⁵

Finally, it has been well documented that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is expected to bring an additional 30 million people in to take fuller advantage of the healthcare system. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) estimates that an additional 30,000 health practitioners are already needed to alleviate *current* health professional shortages.⁶

The Role and Qualifications of Physician Assistants

Certified PAs work in virtually every specialty and subspecialty in medicine and surgery in a wide variety of practice settings. Patients encounter PAs in emergency rooms, critical care units, surgical wards, and other departments in hospitals; in private practices and large public health centers; and in nursing homes and long-term care facilities. PAs provide care on Native American reservations, in forward military and National Guard units, within prison systems, and even in the White House. There PAs perform a range of duties including taking histories and conducting physical examinations, ordering and interpreting tests, diagnosing illnesses, developing and implementing treatment plans, and assisting in or even performing surgery.

³ Association of American Medical Colleges "Workforce Issues in Health Care Reform: Assessing the Present and Preparing for the Future" March 2009.

⁴ Association of American Medical Colleges "Help Wanted: More U.S. Doctors Projections Indicate America Will Face Shortages of M.D.s by 2020" September 2010.

⁵ Hoven, Ardis Dee. "Coping with baby boomers, and staggering statistics." American Medical News. 27 Sept. 2010.

⁶ Association of American Medical Colleges "Workforce Issues in Health Care Reform: Assessing the Present and Preparing for the Future" March 2009.

Prior to entering an accredited, graduate-level PA education program, aspiring PAs typically have undergraduate degrees and work in the medical field in a variety of positions such as paramedics or nursing. They must then complete a two- to three-year graduate-level PA program, where they are trained in medical and behavioral sciences and complete rotations in internal medicine, family medicine, surgery, pediatrics, OB/GYN, emergency medicine and geriatric medicine. After graduation, PAs must complete a rigorous national certification exam to become certified before obtaining a state license. (PAs are licensed by the same state boards of medicine that license physicians for practice.)

The Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE) is a rigorous exam that covers all organ systems and a wide range of task and skill areas. To maintain certification, PAs must pass a similarly comprehensive recertification exam every six years and earn at least 100 credits of continuing medical education every two years. While continued certification is required by only 22 states for licensure renewal, certification is required for reimbursement by Medicare or Medicaid and many private insurers.

The Physician-PA Team

According to a 2011 study conducted by The Bantam Group and commissioned by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), 84 percent of physicians working with certified PAs said that the physician-PA partnership creates the opportunity for the physician to spend more time with patients with critical or complex issues and that it improves workflow for the physician within the practice. More than 70 percent of those physicians indicated that the partnership allows the physician to see more patients during the course of a day, improves the physician's work-life balance, and decreases waiting time for patients. The study also characterized the physician-PA partnership as a "great value" for the practice.

"The role of physician assistants is to become the right hand of the physicians they work with," explains Katherine J. Adamson, MA, PA-C, a certified PA for more than 30 years. "The relationship [between physician and PA-C] is very collegial, and it is from a team perspective that the physicians are comfortable entrusting their patients' well-being to their PA colleagues."

The number of certified physician assistants (identified by the PA-C designation) has increased by 75 percent in the past eight years according to the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). A total of 40,469 PAs were practicing in the year 2000. That number increased to 86,500 by mid-2012. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports similar numbers and projects that the number of PA jobs will increase by 39 percent from 74,800 in 2008 to 103,900 in 2018.

How a practice decides to utilize the services of a PA is up to the hiring entity. For example, in some surgical group practices, PAs are hired to handle pre-op and post-op care. In others, PAs assist in major surgery and perform minor surgery. In some medical practices, PAs have their own panel of patients; in others, the PA and supervising physician alternate visits with each patient so that both are equally involved in the patient's care.

"I have had great success with PAs in my practice," said Norman Chip Harbaugh, M.D., FAAP, of Children's Medical Group in Atlanta. "I am constantly impressed with the efficiency and quality in patient care our PA brings to our practice. Having a medical professional that can provide most services a physician can is a benefit that is unmatched."

Some certified PAs have demonstrated an elevated level of qualification for practice in certain specialties by earning a Certificate of Added Qualifications (CAQ), a new supplementary credential offered by NCCPA to certified PAs practicing in cardiovascular and thoracic surgery, emergency medicine, nephrology, orthopaedic surgery and psychiatry. In 2014, NCCPA will begin awarding CAQs in pediatrics and in hospital medicine. The CAQ provides an opportunity for PAs to document specialty experience, skills and knowledge.

Practical Matters

The decision to hire a PA or any provider at some point comes down to the economics of the proposition. The revenue generated by a PA can approach that of a physician in many settings. In fact, according to a 2008 study of the Medical Group Management Association, the typical certified PA brings in revenue of \$231,000 with an average salary of \$84,000⁷. Taking those numbers into account, after covering the cost of the PA's salary, benefits and incremental overhead, a typical PA

⁷MGMA Physician Compensation and Production Survey: 2008 Report Based on 2007 Data

can easily boost a practice's bottom line by \$30,000 or more in primary care and greater in some specialties⁸.

What's the best place to begin a search? "If you are open to the idea of hiring a new graduate, become a clinical preceptor. That's how you'll find some of the best and brightest graduates and have an opportunity to gauge how they would fit into your practice," says Randy D. Danielsen, PhD, PA-C, author of *The Preceptor's Handbook for Supervising Physicians* and dean of the Arizona School of Health Sciences at A.T. Still University.

Danielsen also reports that about 15 percent of his program's students have jobs lined up before graduation. The Physician Assistant Education Association (www.paeaonline.org) can identify PA programs in your area.

Opportunities to snag top graduates will grow as the PA profession is on the brink of a growth spurt; the Accreditation Review Commission for PA Education reports that more than 50 new programs are in the process of seeking accreditation and could begin accepting students in the next few years.

Physician burnout and the provider shortage are serious issues, but the PA profession is stepping up to bridge the gap, improving access to high quality, affordable health care as members of physician-PA teams. Certified PAs will be used more extensively and in a wider variety of healthcare settings, ultimately saving time, money and improving the health and well-being of individuals and families throughout the country.

John H. Stuemky, MD, FAAP is an associate professor of pediatrics for the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine and former chief of the section of general pediatrics and pediatric emergency medicine at Children's Hospital at OU Medical Center and currently serves as director of the hospital's child protection team. PAs have been making his life and practice better since 1975.

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⁸ Danielsen, Randy, Ruth Ballweg, Linda Vorvick, and Donald Sefcik. *The Preceptor's Handbook for Supervising Physician Assistants*. Jones and Barlett Learning, 2012. Print.