

# Physician Assistant

## History

The profession of physician assistant (PA) originated in the mid-1960s as medical corpsmen returned from Vietnam and sought opportunities to utilize their newly acquired skills in civilian life. Toward the end of that decade, Duke University, the University of Colorado, the University of Washington and Wake Forest University were among the colleges and universities instituting PA courses of study. The early 1970s brought a rapid growth in the number of such educational programs, which were supported initially with \$6.1 million appropriated under the Health Manpower Act of 1972. The funding also supported some of the initial organization and administration of national programs for accreditation of PA educational programs, specifically those designed to prepare individuals as assistants to primary care physicians. Since 1992, the number of accredited PA programs has grown from 55 to 154. The Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) accredits the program to award the professional credential "PA"; in addition, currently 82 percent of the institutions that sponsor PA programs also award an advanced academic degree.

## Career Description

The physician assistant is academically and clinically prepared to practice medicine as part of a team led by a doctor of medicine or osteopathy. Within the physician-PA relationship, PAs make clinical decisions and provide a broad range of diagnostic, therapeutic, preventive and health maintenance services. The clinical role of PAs includes primary and specialty care in medical and surgical practice settings. PA practice is centered on patient care and may include educational, research, and administrative activities.

The role of the physician assistant demands intelligence, sound judgment, intellectual honesty, appropriate interpersonal skills, and the capacity to react to emergencies in a calm and reasoned manner. An attitude of respect for self and others, adherence to the concepts of privilege and confidentiality in communicating with patients, and a commitment to the patient's welfare are essential attributes of the graduate PA.

## Employment Characteristics

According to the 2009 Physician Assistant Census, published by the American Academy of Physician Assistants, 72,433 PAs were in clinical practice at the beginning of 2009; this represents 93 percent of all individuals eligible to practice as PAs. About 36 percent are practicing in primary care. Family medicine is the most common specialty for physician assistants (24.8 percent), followed by emergency medicine, surgery and surgical subspecialties, subspecialties of internal medicine, general internal medicine, and dermatology.

The majority of physician assistants practice in ambulatory care settings. Solo and group practices employ 44 percent of all physician assistants, and 37.5 percent of physician assistants are employed by hospitals, owing in part to the number of PAs working as house staff. Various government agencies employ eight percent of the physician assistant workforce, primarily in state governments and the US Department of Veterans Affairs. The remaining members of the profession practice in community health centers, managed care organizations, freestanding urgent care centers, correctional facilities and other settings.

Physician assistants work an average of 44 hours per week. The number of patient visits for physician assistants in outpatient settings averages 93 per week; in inpatient hospital settings the average is 70.9 patient visits per week. Twenty-eight percent of physician assistants have on-call responsibilities that average 101.5 hours per month.

## Salary

Results of the 2009 AAPA Physician Assistant Census Survey indicate that the mean total annual income from their primary employer for PAs who are not self-employed, and who work at least 32 hours per week for their primary employer, is \$93,105. The comparable mean for PAs who have been in clinical practice for less than 1 year is \$78,405. Salaries vary depending on the experience of the individual, the practice specialty, job responsibilities and the regional cost of living.

Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics from May 2009 (available at [www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes291071.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes291071.htm)) show that the median annual wage of physician assistants was \$84,420. The middle 50 percent of physician assistants earned between \$71,160 and \$99,540. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$55,880, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$115,080. Median annual wages in the industries employing the largest numbers of physician assistants in May 2009 were:

- Outpatient care centers \$87,060
- General medical and surgical hospitals \$86,850
- Offices of physicians \$84,720
- Colleges, universities and professional schools \$82,450
- Federal Executive Branch \$81,180

For more information, refer to [www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary](http://www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary).

## Employment Outlook

Employment of PAs is expected to grow by 39 percent from 2008 to 2018, much faster than the average for all occupations. This rapid job growth reflects the expansion of health care and an emphasis on cost containment, which results in increasing emphasis on use of PAs. Physicians and institutions are expected to employ more PAs to provide

primary care and to assist with medical and surgical procedures because PAs are cost-effective and productive members of the health care team. Physician assistants can relieve physicians of routine duties and procedures.

## **Educational Programs**

As of March 2011, there are 154 accredited PA programs, and the prospects for continuing growth of the profession look strong, with more than 20 new programs in the pipeline and a robust applicant pool that has grown by more than 10 percent each year. PAs are educated as generalists in medicine, and their flexibility allows them to practice medicine in more than 60 medical and surgical specialties.

**Length.** The length of programs varies, largely owing to a difference in student selection criteria and in the educational objectives of the individual program. The most common program length is 27 months, with one year of classroom study and 15 months of clinical rotations. Approximately 16,000 students are enrolled in PA programs; in 2009, the 145 accredited PA programs together graduated more than 5,000 new PAs. For students enrolled in PA programs in 2008, the mean resident tuition was \$50,567 and the mean nonresident tuition was \$61,088.

**Prerequisites.** Although requirements differ widely, general chemistry is required by 88% of programs, followed by physiology (86%), anatomy (86%), microbiology (79%), and biology (74%). Eighty percent of applicants have a baccalaureate degree, most commonly in biology. Less than half of programs (48.2%) require their applicants to have prior health care experience.

**Applicants.** The mean age of applicants is 26.9 years old; three-quarters (74%) are female, and they average 3.7 years of health care experience. A balance of study in the applied behavioral sciences and the biological sciences is advised for students who wish to qualify for admission to a PA program.

**Curriculum.** The curriculum includes 400 hours of basic sciences and nearly 600 hours of clinical medicine. More than 80 percent of programs award a master's degree. More than 80 percent of programs are housed at a university or college and 14 percent in academic health centers. Accreditation standards require competency-based curricula. The professional curriculum for PA education includes basic medical, behavioral and social sciences; clinical preparatory sciences, patient assessment and supervised clinical practice; health policy; and professional practice issues. Supervised clinical practice rotations in pediatrics, family medicine, general internal medicine, prenatal care and women's health, geriatrics, emergency medicine, psychiatry/behavioral medicine and general surgery offer advanced applied content and supervised clinical work experience in dealing with commonly encountered demands for the primary health care of individuals from infancy through childhood, adolescence and the various phases of adulthood. These experiences are provided in outpatient, emergency, inpatient and long-term care clinical settings.

## **Licensure**

PAs receive their national certification from the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). Only graduates of accredited PA programs are eligible to take the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE). Upon certification, PAs must complete a continuous six-year cycle to maintain certification. Every two years, PAs must earn and log 100 CME hours and reregister the certificate with NCCPA (second and fourth years), and, by the end of the sixth year, recertify by successfully completing the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Examination (PANRE).

All states require passage of the PANCE for state licensure. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and all US territories that regulate health professionals, with the exception of Puerto Rico, have enacted laws regulating the practice of physician assistants. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the majority of U.S. territories authorize PA prescribing. In order to practice as a physician assistant, an individual must meet the state's licensing criteria and have a supervising physician.

## **Inquiries**

### **Careers**

American Academy of Physician Assistants  
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(703) 836-2272  
E-mail: [aapa@aapa.org](mailto:aapa@aapa.org)  
[www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org)

Physician Assistant Education Association  
300 North Washington Street, Suite 710  
Alexandria, VA 22314-2544  
(703) 548-5538  
E-mail: [info@PAEAonline.org](mailto:info@PAEAonline.org)  
[www.paeaonline.org](http://www.paeaonline.org)

### **National Certification**

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants  
12000 Findley Road, Suite 100  
Johns Creek, GA 30097  
(678) 417-8100  
[www.nccpa.net](http://www.nccpa.net)

**Program Accreditation**

Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant  
12000 Findley Road, Suite 150  
Johns Creek, GA 30097  
(770) 476-1224  
E-mail: [arc-pa@arc-pa.org](mailto:arc-pa@arc-pa.org)  
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**Note:** Adapted in part from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Physician Assistants, at [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos081.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos081.htm).