

# Physician Assistant



## History

The profession of physician assistant (PA) originated in the mid 1960s with leadership from Duke University, the University of Colorado, the University of Washington, and Wake Forest University. 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 authority of the Health Manpower Act of 1972. The funding also supported some of the initial organization and administration of the national program for the accreditation of educational programs in this field, specifically those designed to prepare individuals as assistants to primary care physicians. Since 1992, the number of accredited PA programs has more than doubled from 55 to 142. While the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) accredits the program to award the professional credential "PA," currently 80% 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 with the direction and responsible supervision of a doctor of medicine or osteopathy. The physician-PA team relationship is fundamental to the PA profession and enhances the delivery of high-quality health care. 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.

Eighty-five percent of all individuals eligible to practice as PAs were in clinical practice at the beginning of 2008.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that the number of PA jobs will increase by 27% between 2006 and 2016. The BLS predicts the total number of jobs in the country will grow by 10% over this 10-year period. The PA profession was ranked the fourth fastest growing profession in the country by CNN.com and Forbes.com in 2007.



## Employment Characteristics

According to the 2008 Physician Assistant Census, published by the American Academy of Physician Assistants, 68,124 PAs were in clinical practice at the beginning of 2008. About 36% are practicing in primary care. Family medicine is the most common specialty for physician assistants (26%), followed by surgery and surgical subspecialties, emergency medicine, subspecialties of internal medicine, general internal medicine, and dermatology.

The majority of physician assistants practice in ambulatory care settings. Solo and group practices employ 56% of all physician assistants. The number of physician assistants employed by hospitals is 24%, owing in part to the number of physician assistants

working as house staff. The government employs 9% of the physician assistant workforce, primarily in the military and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The remaining members of the profession are practicing 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 92 per week; in inpatient settings the average is 60 patient visits per week. Thirty-eight percent of physician assistants have on-call responsibilities that average 95 hours per month.



## Salary

Results of the 2008 American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) Physician Assistant Census Survey indicate that the mean total 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 \$89,987. The comparable mean for PAs who have been in clinical practice for less than 1 year is \$76,232. Salaries vary depending on the experience of the individual, the practice specialty, job responsibilities, and the regional cost of living. For more information, refer to [www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary](http://www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary).



## Educational Programs

**Length.** Although 27 to 32 months is most common, the length of programs varies, largely owing to a difference in student selection criteria and in the educational objectives of the individual program. Approximately 12,000 students are enrolled in PA programs. The number of new graduates in 2007 was approximately 4,600.

**Prerequisites.** Although requirements differ widely, the majority of students have a BA/BS degree and prior health care experience before admission to a PA program. 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.** 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 6-year cycle to maintain certification. Every 2 years, PAs must earn and log 100 CME hours and reregister the certificate with the 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. Forty-four states have provisions for new graduates to practice prior to passage of PANCE. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the majority of US territories have enacted laws regulating the practice of physician assistants and authorizing PA prescribing. In order to practice as a physician assistant, an individual must meet the state's licensing criteria and have a supervising physician.



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**National Certification**

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**Program Accreditation**

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