The Physician Assistant

CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS
Foreword

With the printing of the 15th edition of *The Physician Assistant*, we at CAPA can look back and see the progress that our profession has made over the years. All those who came before us should be recognized, for it is because of their hard work we have matured to the great profession we are today. *The Physician Assistant* booklet is an excellent educational tool for those who want to learn about physician assistants and the critical role we play in the health care team. CAPA is here to fulfill our mission as stated below.

**CAPA Mission Statement**

*The mission of the California Academy of Physician Assistants is to represent and serve physician assistants statewide.

As an advocate of its members for quality health care and for their valued, unique alliance with supervising physicians, CAPA will enhance, educate and empower physician assistants for the ultimate benefit of their patients.*

**CAPA Vision Statement**

*Fully integrate PAs into every aspect of California’s health care.*

**PARTNERS IN MEDICINE**
The Physician Assistant History and Concept

Physician assistants (PAs) are highly qualified practitioners who are graduates of an accredited PA program and who are licensed by the state to practice medicine as delegated by and with the supervision of a physician.

The supervising physician may delegate to the PA most medical services and duties that are routinely performed within the normal scope of the physician’s practice and which the PA is competent to perform. The supervising physician has ultimate responsibility for the patient and supervision of the PA.

We are currently experiencing a shortage of primary care physicians. Similarly, in 1965, primary care physicians were in short supply, particularly in rural and inner city areas. In an effort to augment scarce medical supply, Dr. Eugene Stead of Duke University created the PA concept and established its first training program. He believed that, under the supervision of a physician, PAs could safely and effectively provide services previously provided solely by physicians. He was accurate in his vision. Today, there are 187 accredited PA programs and over 95,000 physician assistants nationwide. In California we have 11 PA programs and over 10,000 PAs.

PAs provide a broad, comprehensive range of diagnostic and therapeutic services. Such duties include performing physical examinations, diagnosing, and treating illnesses, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests, following chronic medical conditions, suturing lacerations, assisting with surgery and making rounds in nursing homes and hospitals. Physician assistant practice is centered on patient care and may include education, research, and administrative activities.

Physicians of any specialty may employ a PA. Just as there are many kinds of physician specialists there are many kinds of PAs.
The Supervising Physician

Every physician assistant must have a supervising physician. A PA may have multiple supervising physicians and a supervising physician may supervise more than one PA. In California, “supervision” means reviewing with the PA when needed, either directly or by electronic means, the findings of the history and physical examination and the tasks performed by the PA. Supervision need not be given prior to treatment, nor must supervising physicians be on the premises as long as they are available by phone or other electronic means and within a reasonable distance.

The physician-PA team must establish, in writing, guidelines for timely supervision. They may be general or specific and may include standing orders, protocols, prescription drug order guidelines, individual patient orders, emergency consultation guidelines, and chart review mechanisms. The physician has the responsibility of following the patient’s progress to ensure that the PA does not function autonomously.

Very often physicians serve as preceptors for students in a physician assistant training program prior to employing a PA. As preceptors they become involved in the teaching process and can assess firsthand the ability and potential of a PA. Many preceptors go on to hire PAs for their practice. Physicians wishing to become preceptors or to locate qualified physician assistants for their practice should contact the individual training programs or the California Academy of Physician Assistants.
Because physician assistant practice is directed by a supervising physician, and a physician assistant acts as an agent for that physician, the orders given and the tasks performed by a physician assistant shall be considered the same if they had been given and performed by the supervising physician. PAs may perform all tasks or services delegated to them by their supervising physician. The scope of practice of the supervising physician determines the type of services rendered by the PA. Medical procedures and tasks PAs may perform in California include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Take a thorough history, perform an appropriate physical examination and make an assessment and diagnosis therefrom, and record and present pertinent data in a manner meaningful to the physician.

2. Order or perform routine laboratory and screening procedures including, but not limited to, these examples:
   - The drawing of blood and routine examination of the blood
   - Order radiological studies
   - Catheterization and routine urinalysis
   - Nasogastric intubation and gastric lavage
   - Pelvic examinations, including bimanual examinations and Papanicolaou smears

3. Order or perform routine therapeutic procedures including, but not limited to, these examples:
   - Injections
   - Immunizations
   - Debridement, suturing and care of wounds
   - Strapping, casting and splinting
   - Incision and drainage of skin infections

4. Order or perform many specialized therapeutic and diagnostic procedures following appropriate training and demonstrated competency, including but not limited to:
   - Biopsies
   - Lumbar punctures
   - Vein harvesting
   - And many others depending on specialty

5. Recognize and evaluate situations which call for immediate attention of the primary care physician and institute, when necessary, emergency treatment procedures essential for the life of the patient.

6. Instruct and counsel patients regarding matters pertaining to their physical and mental health, such as diets, social habits, family planning, normal growth and development, and the aging process.

7. Assist the physician in the institutional setting by arranging hospital and nursing home admissions, providing services to patients requiring continuing care, including the review of treatment and therapy plans.

8. May serve as first or second assistant in surgery under the supervision of a supervising physician.

9. Perform surgical procedures without the personal presence of the supervising physician which are customarily performed under local anesthesia.

10. Initiate and facilitate the referral of patients to the appropriate health facilities, agencies and resources of the community.

11. Administer or provide medication to a patient, or issue drug orders orally or in writing.

12. Order or transmit an order for x-ray, other studies, physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, speech therapy, wound care, nutrition counseling and nursing services.

13. Provide the above services throughout the continuum of life including newborn care, child and adult care, obstetric care and geriatric care.

PAs are subject to the limitations set forth by their supervising physicians and to the policies of the employing institutions, in addition to the laws and regulations governing utilization of PAs in California.
PA Education and Certification

Education:
There are 11 accredited primary care physician assistant programs in California and 187 accredited programs throughout the country, most of which require 21-33 months to complete and the majority graduate students with a master’s degree. Programs are accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) based on quality standards deemed essential for PA education. Most physician assistants nationwide are trained in broad-based primary care, although there are PA specialists as well.

The education of PA students is similar to that of medical students in that a didactic phase of intense academic coursework is followed by supervised clinical experiences or rotations.

In the first year, students usually complete courses in such topics as anatomy and physiology, microbiology, physical diagnosis, pharmacology, common laboratory and screening techniques, common medical and surgical procedures, medical ethics, and a course in clinical medicine, among others.

In the clinical phase, students apply the skills they learned during the didactic phase of training through rotations in primary care and specialty settings under the supervision of a physician. Training emphasizes eliciting complete patient histories, performing physical examinations, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests, instituting therapeutic plans, and patient education focusing on preventive medicine.

Examination:
Every new PA in California must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). The examination is comprehensive in scope and assesses academic and patient management knowledge.

New Certification: (as of 2014)
PAs may maintain national certification by earning 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years, and are retested every 10 years by the NCCPA.

Licensure:
To practice in California, each PA must be licensed by the Physician Assistant Board. This requires submitting an official application and fees, proof of graduation from an approved program and successful completion of the National Certifying Examination. Regulations require completion of 50 hours of Continuing Medical Education every two years when renewing their state license. Unless the PA has current NCCPA certification at the time of license renewal.
Practice Settings

Physician assistants are employed in many specialties. A partial listing includes: general and family practice; emergency medicine; pediatrics; obstetrics and gynecology; surgery; orthopedics; geriatrics; women's health; occupational medicine; psychiatry and mental health; cardiology and internal medicine; oncology; and administrative and educational appointment.

California PAs practice in a variety of rural and urban settings, always under the supervision of a licensed physician. Typical practice settings include:

* Solo and group practices
* HMOs
* County facilities
* Clinics
* Hospitals
* Hospices
* Student health services
* Teaching institutions
* Research facilities
* Military facilities
* Veterans Administration facilities
* Federal and State correctional institutions
* Nursing homes
* House calls/Home care

PAs may work in any medical setting in which their supervising physician(s) practice, including private offices, general acute care hospitals, acute psychiatric hospitals, special hospitals, nursing facilities, intermediate care facilities, and private homes.

The granting of hospital privileges in California is described in the California Code of Regulations, Title 22, Section 70706.1, Granting of Nonphysician Privileges: (b) Physician's Assistant. A physician's assistant who practices in a licensed facility shall be supervised by a physician approved by the Division of Allied Health Professions of the Board of Medical Quality Assurance who is a member of the active medical staff of that facility. Physician's assistants shall apply to and be approved by the Executive Committee of the medical staff of the facility in which the physician's assistant wishes to practice.

Acceptance and Quality of Care

Patient Acceptance

Patient acceptance of PAs is excellent. Surveys repeatedly indicate patients are highly satisfied with the job competence and professional manner of PAs. The utilization of physician assistants has resulted in improved access to health care and enhanced patient satisfaction.

Quality of Care

Results of studies comparing the primary care services of physician assistants with those of general or family physicians and general internists have consistently shown no discernible difference in the quality of their diagnostic or therapeutic care. Most findings indicate that PAs are able to spend more time per patient visit, provide more thorough medical record documentation, and devote more time to patient education. Physician assistants contribute positively and significantly to health care delivery, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Depending on the setting, PAs may provide 65-90% of the services routinely performed by physicians in general or family practice, with a comparable level of skill to that of physicians. All PAs work in team practice with physicians determining which tasks/procedures they wish to delegate to the PA.
Economic Factors

Cost Effectiveness:
PAs have been found to be highly cost effective when fully utilized. Research has shown that patient visit costs are less when PAs are employed in physicians’ practices. At the same time, practice productivity measured in patient visits increased and practice income rises accordingly. Most physicians who hire PAs do so less for the added profit than for the added freedom, time, and flexibility employing a PA affords them.

Salaries:
There is no fixed salary scale for physician assistants. Salaries today vary widely and reflect the type of practice, the practice location, the experience of the PA, and the benefit of the PA to the practice. The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) maintains information on practice profiles, salaries and benefits which are updated annually.

Professional benefits such as continuing medical education time and alternative payment arrangements such as profit sharing can all be negotiated on an individual basis and formalized by written or verbal agreement.

Professional Liability Insurance:
Liability insurance covering the PA is generally paid by the employing physician or employing hospital and can be arranged in one of two ways. In the first, the PA is covered by the umbrella policy or “rider” of the physician or hospital. Many carriers do not increase the premium when a PA is employed; some increase it only slightly, while others may increase it significantly. Physicians or hospitals should consult their carrier about their particular policy. In the second method, the PA may take out a separate individual policy.

Physician assistants have proven to be an asset in reducing malpractice exposure in private practice settings. This is attributed to the extra time PAs devote to patient education and counseling, improved patient compliance, and the close teamwork between the physician and PA.

Reimbursement:
Physician assistants usually don’t charge directly for their services. Reimbursement is made commonly through the supervising physician or the employing institution.

Medicare currently reimburses for physician services provided by PAs, including surgical assists, under Parts A and B at 85% of the physician fee schedule. In certain outpatient situations, it may be at 100%.

In California, the Medi-Cal program reimburses for services provided by PAs at 100% of the supervising physician’s reimbursement rate. Medi-Cal has some specific requirements for physicians utilizing PAs.

The private insurer reimburses at varying rates up to 100% of that of the physician.
For More Information About PAs

1. Up-to-date information on California PAs, and employment information:

California Academy of Physician Assistants
2318 S. Fairview St.
Santa Ana, CA  92704-4839
(714) 427-0321  FAX (714) 427-0324
capa@capanet.org
www.capanet.org

2. National information on programs, legislation, and certification/recertification:

American Academy of Physician Assistants
2318 Mill Road, Suite 1300
Alexandria, VA  22314-6868
(703) 836-2272
www.aapa.org

Physician Assistant Education Association
300 N. Washington Street, Suite 710
Alexandria, VA 22314-2544
(703) 548-5538
www.paeaoonline.org

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants
12000 Findley Road, Suite 100
Johns Creek, GA 30097-1409
(678) 417-8100  FAX: (678) 417-8135
www.nccpa.net

3. California regulations, applications for licensure, and information for supervising physicians and PAs:

Physician Assistant Board
2005 Evergreen Street, Suite 1100
Sacramento, CA  95815-3831
(916) 561-8780  FAX: (916) 263-2671
www.pac.ca.gov

4. Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine who wish to supervise PAs should contact:

Osteopathic Medical Board of California
1300 National Drive, Suite 150
Sacramento, CA  95834-1991
(916) 928-8390  FAX (916) 928-8392
www.ombc.ca.gov
5. California PA training programs, preceptorships, and general information:

USC Primary Care
Physician Assistant Program
Dept. of Family Medicine
Keck School of Medicine
1000 S. Fremont Avenue
Unit 7, Bldg A11, Room 11-150
Alhambra, CA 91803
(626) 457-4240  FAX (626) 457-4245
www.keck.usc.edu

Stanford University School of Medicine
Primary Care Associate Program
1215 Welch Road, Modular G
Palo Alto, CA  94305
(650) 725-6959   FAX: (650) 723-9692
http://pcap.stanford.edu

UC Davis
Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing
Physician Assistant Studies Degree Program
Education Building
4610 X Street
Sacramento, CA  95817
(916) 734-2145
www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu

Western University of Health Sciences
Masters of Science Physician Assistant Studies
309 E. Second Street
Pomona, CA  91766
(909) 469-5335   FAX: (909) 469-5570
www.westernu.edu

Samuel Merritt University
Physician Assistant Program
450 30th Street
Oakland, CA  94609
(510) 869-6608
www.samuelmerritt.edu

RCRMC/RCCD - Moreno Valley College
Physician Assistant Program
16130 Lasselle Street
Parkside Complex Bldg 21
Moreno Valley, CA  92551
(951) 571-6166   FAX: (951) 571-6221
www.mvc.edu

Loma Linda University
School of Allied Health Professions
Dept. of Physician Assistant Sciences
24785 Stewart Street
Evans Hall Room 201
Loma Linda, CA  92350
(909) 558-7295   FAX: (909) 558-0495
www.llu.edu

Touro University – California
Joint Physician Assistant
MSPAS/MPH Program
1310 Club Drive
Vallejo, CA  94592
(707) 638-5814
www.cehs.tu.edu

San Joaquin Valley College
Physician Assistant Program
8344 W. Mineral King Avenue
Visalia, CA  93291
(559) 651-2500
www.sjvc.edu

Marshall B. Ketchum University
Physician Assistant Program
(anticipates matriculating its first class in January 2015)
One University Drive
Orange, CA  92866
(714) 997-6711
www.ketchum.edu

Chapman University
Physician Assistant Studies Program
(anticipates matriculating its first class in Fall 2016)
One University Drive
Orange, CA 92866
(714) 997-6711
www.chapman.edu

California Baptist University
Physician Assistant Program
(anticipates matriculating its first class in Fall 2016)
8432 Magnolia Avenue
Riverside, CA 92504
(951) 552-8724
www.calbaptist.edu