Physician Assistants (PA’s) practice medicine under the direction of physicians and surgeons. They are formally trained to examine patients, diagnose injuries and illnesses, and provide treatment.

**DUTIES**
Physician assistants typically do the following:
- Review patients’ medical histories
- Conduct physical exams to check patients’ health
- Order and interpret diagnostic tests, such as x rays or blood tests
- Make diagnoses concerning a patient’s injury or illness
- Give treatment, such as setting broken bones and immunizing patients
- Educate and counsel patients and their families—for example, answering questions about how to care for a child with asthma
- Prescribe medicine when needed
- Record a patient’s progress
- Conduct or participate in outreach programs; talking to groups about managing diseases and promoting wellness

Physician assistants work under the supervision of a physician or surgeon; however, their specific duties and the extent to which they must be supervised differ from state to state.

Physician assistants work in all areas of medicine, including primary care and family medicine, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. The work of physician assistants depends in large part on their specialty and what their supervising physician needs them to do. For example, a physician assistant working in surgery may close incisions and provide care before and after the operation. A physician assistant working in pediatrics may examine a child and give routine vaccinations.

In rural and medically underserved areas, physician assistants may be the primary care providers at clinics where a physician is present only 1 or 2 days per week. In these locations, physician assistants confer with the physician and other healthcare workers as needed and as required by law.

Some physician assistants make house calls or visit nursing homes to treat patients, reporting back to the physician afterward.

Physician assistants are different from medical assistants. Medical assistants do routine clinical and clerical tasks and they do not practice medicine.

**IMPORTANT QUALITIES**
- **Communication skills.** Physician assistants must explain complex medical issues in a way that patients can understand. They must also communicate with doctors and other healthcare workers to ensure that they provide the best possible patient care.
- **Compassion.** Many physician assistants are drawn to the profession by a desire to help people. They should enjoy helping others.
- **Detail oriented.** Physician assistants should be focused and observant to evaluate and treat patients properly.
- **Emotional stability.** Physician assistants, particularly those working in surgery or emergency medicine, should be able to work well under pressure. They must remain calm in stressful situations in order to provide quality care.
- **Problem-solving skills.** Physician assistants need to evaluate patients’ symptoms and administer the appropriate treatments. They must be diligent when investigating complicated medical issues so that they can determine the best course of treatment for each patient.
EDUCATION
Most applicants to physician assistant education programs already have a bachelor’s degree and some healthcare-related work experience. However, admissions requirements vary from program to program. Many have experience working as registered nurses, emergency medical technicians, or paramedics before they apply to apply to a physician assistant program.

Physician assistant education programs usually take at least 2 years of full-time study. Most accredited programs offer a master’s degree. Education includes classroom and laboratory instruction in subjects such as pathology, human anatomy, physiology, clinical medicine, physical diagnosis, and medical ethics. The programs also include supervised clinical training in several areas, including family medicine, internal medicine, emergency medicine, and pediatrics. Many accredited programs have clinical teaching affiliations with medical schools. Sometimes, students serve in one or more of these areas under the supervision of a physician who is looking to hire a physician assistant. In this way, the rotation may lead to permanent employment.

Related Schools

- Eastern Virginia Medical School
- Jefferson College of Health Sciences
- James Madison University
- Lynchburg College
- Mary Baldwin College (new program – not accredited at this time)
- Shenandoah University

For a list of accredited physician assistant programs, visit: http://www.arc-pa.org/acc_programs/

LICENSURE
All states and the District of Columbia require physician assistants to be licensed. To become licensed, they must pass the physician Assistant National Certifying Examination from the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA). After they pass the exam, they may use the credential “Physician Assistant-Certified.”

To keep their certification, physician assistants must complete 100 hours of continuing education every 2 years. Beginning in 2014, the recertification exam is required every 10 years.

WORKING CONDITIONS
Physician assistants work in physicians’ offices, hospitals, and other healthcare settings. In hospitals, physician assistants may work nights, weekends, or holidays. They may also be on call, meaning they must be ready to respond to a work request with little notice. Most work full time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OFFICES OF PHYSICIANS</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOSPITALS</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTPATIENT CARE CENTERS</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNMENT</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES, &amp; PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Physician assistant work can be both physically and emotionally demanding. Physician assistants spend much of their time on their feet, making rounds and evaluating patients. Although the work can be stressful, helping patients can be rewarding.

**JOB OUTLOOK**

Employment of physician assistants is projected to grow 38 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations.

Demand for healthcare services will increase because of the growing and aging population. More people means more need for healthcare specialists, and as the large baby-boom generation ages, it will require more healthcare. This, coupled with an increase in several chronic diseases such as diabetes, will drive the need for physician assistants to provide preventive care and treat those who are sick.

Physician assistants, who can perform many of the same services as doctors, are expected to have a larger role in giving routine care because they are more cost effective than physicians. As more physicians retire or enter specialty areas of medicine, more physician assistants are expected to take on the role of primary care provider. Furthermore, the number of individuals who have access to primary care services will increase as a result of federal health insurance reform.

The role of physician assistants is expected to expand as states continue to allow assistants to do more procedures and as insurance companies expand their coverage of physician assistant services.

**AVERAGE SALARY**

The median annual wage for physician assistants was $90,930 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $62,430, and the top 10 percent earned more than $124,770.

In May 2012, the median annual wages for physician assistants in the top five industries in which these assistants worked were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>$93,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient care centers</td>
<td>$93,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physicians</td>
<td>$90,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges, universities, &amp; professional schools</td>
<td>$88,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>$86,870</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

*American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA)*

2318 Mill Road, Suite 1300
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 836-2272 (phone)
(703-684-1924 (fax)
aapa@aapa.org
http://www.apta.org