

The Vagabond Apostrophe

Vagabond: (1) Moving from place to place without a fixed home; (2) Leading an unsettled, irresponsible or disreputable life. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

ALTHOUGH NO LONGER THE FOCUS OF MUCH ATTENTION, for almost 40 years, physician assistant organizations, medical journals and the public press were bedeviled by a mundane punctuation mark: the apostrophe.

At the outset, Eugene A. Stead Jr. and his colleagues at Duke University termed their program the “physician’s assistant program”; the graduates were called “physician’s assistants.” It was certainly not the first time the term had been used. As the concept became widely discussed, especially at the American Medical Association (AMA), grammarians pointed out that while the assistant to a single physician would properly be called a “physician’s assistant,” these new health workers in the aggregate should preferably be referred to as “physicians’ assistants.”

accounts of the founding of AAPA begin with its formation in a trailer on the campus of Duke University in May 1968 as the American Association of Physician’s Assistants. That is the name given in the brief history of AAPA that appears in the early issues of its journal. But it isn’t true. The earliest minutes of meetings of the organization use the term “physician assistants” (without the apostrophe, or the “s”). AAPA was incorporated in the state of North Carolina, however, as the American Association of Physicians’ Assistants. Later in 1968, the apostrophe in the minutes began to migrate to a position before the “s.”

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The first few issues of the well-edited P.A. Journal carry the tagline “The Official Publication of the American Academy of Physician’s Assistants” on the cover. With the opening of the joint National Office of AAPA and APAP in May 1974, order seems to have been established. Letterhead on official stationery placed the apostrophe to follow the “s,” and the apostrophe now followed the s on the cover of the journal. Minutes of meetings, when recorded and transcribed by staff rather than volunteer elected officers, were (for the most part) consistent. But correspondence was another matter. Thomas R. Godkins, PA, president of the Academy in 1975, was renowned for voluminous correspondence. Almost without fail, however, he put the apostrophe before the “s” in his text on stationery that had it following the “s.” The apostrophe then meandered back and forth for the next several years.

Looking back, it is still hard to believe how much time and energy (and money, since time has value) was spent on the ensuing debate. Entire meetings were devoted to the question. As some of us pointed out at the time, without resolution and agreement on a common term of usage, the issue would become a proofreading and copy-editing nightmare.

One might think that editors of prestigious journals would establish proper usage, but such was not the case. A major article in 1972 by Malcolm C. Todd, MD, chair of the AMA Council on Health Manpower, in the Journal of the American Medical Association is titled, “National Certification of Physicians’ Assistants by Uniform Examination” (grammatically correct), while an article by Eugene C. Nelson, MPH, from the Dartmouth PA program, in the same journal, is titled, “Patients’ Acceptance of Physician’s Assistants” (grammatically incorrect). It seems to have been “author’s choice.”

The Association of Physician Assistant Programs (predecessor of the Physician Assistant Education Association) took a more enlightened path. From the outset, in 1972, recognizing the potential for confusion, it never used the apostrophe or the “s.” A transient exception occurred in 1974, when an enterprising staff member in the joint national office of AAPA and APAP, believing that the two organizations should be consistent with one another, inadvertently printed stationery for APAP that put an apostrophe after the “s” on the letterhead.

The epitome of inconsistency in the use of the apostrophe during the early years of the profession was exhibited by the American Academy of Physician Assistants. Many, if not most,

The organizations that were developed for accreditation of PA programs and certification of graduates took yet a third path. For a while they evaded the issue by creating accrediting and certifying agencies for “the assistant to the primary

Physician's Assistants Physician Assistants Physicians' Assistants Physician Assistant

care physician.” When that wouldn’t hold up because of the inevitable trend to specialization (e.g., surgeon assistants), they adopted the AMA’s preferred terminology, which placed the apostrophe before the “s.” What emerged were the Joint Review Committee on Educational Programs for Physician’s Assistants and the National Commission on Certification of Physician’s Assistants.

There it was, for all to see: four governing organizations with three different terms for the same practitioner! What were independent writers and editors to think? What were state legislators and regulators to do? As it turns out, there are examples of the use of all three—in addition to the use of the “s” without any apostrophe at all. This potpourri, while clearly not sustainable, did not yield to a quick and unified fix. In fact, it would take decades for a common term to emerge and for (almost) common usage to take place.

Donald W. Fisher, PhD, the first executive director of the joint national office of AAPA and APAP, recalls clearly a conversation with Thomas E. Piemme, MD, early in 1974, during which they agreed that a common usage needed to be established before state legislation became widespread and before AAPA constituent organizations could proliferate. But it was slow to happen. Many of the participants in governance of the four organizations felt that further discussion of the issue was a waste of time when there were far more pressing issues to be discussed.

AAPA finally amended its Articles of Incorporation to remove the “s” and the apostrophe in June 1981; ARC-PA and NCCPA followed suit. Unfortunately, the damage had been done. It has taken the intervening 25 years for the apostrophe and the “s” to disappear from “physician assistant” in state legislation and regulations, and from the incorporated names of constituent organizations of the Academy. Even today one can find the occasional remnant. For example, the state of Michigan uses the apostrophe (before the “s”) in its legislation and regulations, as does the American Society of Orthopedic Physician’s Assistants.

A Google search of “physician assistants” reveals only occasional use of the apostrophe among the hundreds of entries—most often in the public press. The staffs of both AAPA and the NCCPA are rather diligent about notifying editors of magazines and newspapers about proper usage when they see it. But vagabonds, it seems, will always be with us. **PA**



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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and not of the PAHx.