

Use of the title physician's assistant prior to 1965

By Reginald Carter, PhD, PA

Searching old USA newspapers using the key word "physician's assistants" produces some interesting results about how the term was used prior to 1965. Over all, the search found that the term appeared 610 times from 1850 to 1965 in newspaper advertisements, want ads and articles. Many of the occurrences were repeated daily in the newspapers for several weeks, so the total non-duplicates were less than a hundred. So, how was the term "physician's assistant" used prior to the formal education of PAs in the 1960s?

An advertisement printed in the *Sunday Dispatch* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) on September 16, 1855 used the term physician's assistant to describe Dr. L. B. Wright's Vegetable Liquid Cathartic, or Pleasant Family Physic (basically a laxative). Dr. Wright writes, "I have used it constantly in my practice for upwards of ten years in all cases where a good Physic and Alterative was required, and would not now do without it. It is the **PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT**, as well as the safest family medicine in use." An article titled "Future of the Microscope" that appeared in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* (Kalamazoo, Michigan) on September 26, 1895 begins, "As the **physician's assistant** and guide in diagnosis, the microscope is coming rapidly to the front. It is now the custom with some advanced physicians, whenever there is a case with obscure symptoms, or where consultations are thought necessary, to draw a few drops of the patient's blood and examine it under the microscope." So in these two cases, the term physician's assistant was used to describe a patient medicine and a laboratory instrument used by physicians. What about people?



DR. L.B. WRIGHT'S - LIQUID CATHARTIC - OR - FAMILY PHYSIC MEDICINE Bottle , ca. 1840 - 1860

PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT
Nose and throat specialist wishes lady assistant for permanent position. Intelligence, initiative and high school education required. Age. 25 to 35 years. Experience in nursing desirable but not necessary. Good salary to right person. State qualifications when writing for interview. Box 7685, Plain Dealer.

Example of Want Ad published in the *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio) July 27, 1920

There were a number of want ads from individuals who sought the services of a physician's assistant. The ads are only a few lines. A good example is an ad that appeared in the *New York Herald* (New York, New York) on July 14, 1869. It reads as follows: **WANTED – A PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT OF GOOD conditions. Apply at 537 9th av., between 19th and 40th sts.** What the qualifications were for this position are not stated. However, ads printed in the *New York Herald* (New York, New York) on November 26, 1893 and the *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, Illinois) on January 5, 1894 by individuals seeking employment as physician's assistants do state their credentials as follows: **LADY graduate of a medical school wishes position in hospital or as physician's assistant.**

Address O.L., 215 Herald Main Office and SITUATION WANTED – BY YOUNG SWEEDISH lady as

physician's assistant; about four years' experience; willing to travel; good reference. Address Z 233_Inter Ocean.

At the turn of the 20th century, it appears that some nurses saw their roles as physician's assistants. For example, there is an article that appeared in the *Morning Star* (Rockford, Illinois) on September 28, 1905 announcing that funds had been received by the Philadelphia schools for nurses to provide "a number of young women from every county" free training. The goal was to help "in this way every village and township." The article later states that "In addition to regular nursing, the young women are taught how to preserve their own health; how to recognize, avoid and destroy contagion; how to establish and maintain sanitary conditions about the home; they are prepared for position as office nurse and **physician's assistant** ..." On October 27, 1922 the following ad appeared in the *Miami Herald* (Miami, Florida): **REGISTERED nurse desires position as physician's assistant. Competent. Some X-Ray experience. Box E-88.**

There are a number of news articles that mention individuals as being physician's assistants. An article titled "Death of a Prominent Surgeon," printed in the *Patriot* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) on January 8, 1887 indicated that the deceased was "a pupil of Professor Samuel D. Gross, and became his **physician's assistant**." It was common in the 1800s for individuals to learn the art of medicine by reading and working with a physician. An article that appeared in the *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio) on September 18, 1887 about a woman being named a public notary states that she had been "a teacher in a public school and in a commercial college and has also acted in the capacity of **physician's assistant**." On January 11, 1875 the *Providence Evening Press* (Providence, Rhode Island) published an article on experimentation with blood transfusion. The account states that "The patient was a young woman whose life was endangered by hemorrhage. Blood was taken from the arm of a **physician's assistant** by a pump heated to forty degrees, and passed into the veins of the dying woman. In a few days she left the hospital cured." Luckily for her, the blood-type matched. On December 11, 1912 an article appeared in the *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, Florida) about a murder. One of the witnesses was described as a former "**physician's assistant** in this city and was regarded as an expert in the administration of anesthetic. In connection with his medical studies, he acted as a reporter for local newspapers on special assignments."



The Stage Section of the Sunday Oregonian, Portland, August 2, 1908 featuring descriptions of Vaudeville Acts

It appears that the use of the term physician's assistant was well established in the public domain by the turn of the 20th century when Vaudeville was a major source of entertainment. On August 2, 1908 the *Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) gave the following review for coming attractions at the local theater: "Ott, Nelson and Steadman will be another of the great acts. They have a comedy sketch, 'Nearly a Doctor.' In this Miss Nelson appears as a **physician's assistant**, Steadman is an office boy and Ott is a

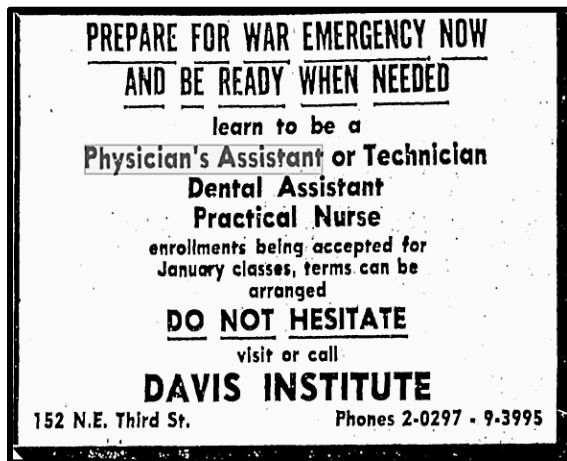
patient. It is said to be a laugh from one end to the other and the act has been a hit on all the big vaudeville circuits of the East. This is the first Western appearance of the trio.”

Notification dates for Civil Service examinations included positions for physician’s assistant. On December 11, 1912 the *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, Florida) posted the following: **Pharmacist and physician’s assistant (male), in the U.S. Penitentiary, at Leavenworth, Kansas, at \$1000 a year. Exam., November 18.** A similar notification appeared on October 24, 1914 in the *Morning Star* (Rockford, Illinois) **for a pharmacist and physician’s assistant to fill prescriptions and to administer anesthetics** at the United States penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas for \$1000. It is noteworthy that one of the first federally sponsored PA Education Programs was established at the U.S. penitentiary in Springfield, MO in the late 1960s.

Even Hollywood celebrities enjoyed the services of a physician’s assistant. The following tidbit of gossip appeared in the *News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina) on August 30, 1933 under the heading **“Tallulah in Hospital: New York, Aug. 29 – Tallulah Bankhead, stage and screen star, was under observation today at Doctor’s Hospital where a physician’s assistant described her condition was not serious. He said the actress was ‘fairly comfortable.’”** Since she lived another 35 years, the physician’s assistant must have done a good job taking care of her.



Lobby card for the 1932 film *Faithless*, MGM, Public Domain



By the 1950s, ads for education programs designed to train physician’s assistants began appearing in newspapers. One such ad that appeared in the *Miami Herald* (Miami, Florida) on January 7, 1951 is shown here. Apparently, the Korean War that began in 1950 was the “selling point” for this ad. The term physician’s assistant could well have been interchangeable with medical assistant – so it is difficult to know for what roles these students were being trained. Accreditation standards for Medical Assistant Programs were not established until 1969 at a time when formal education programs for modern-day physician assistants were

just emerging throughout the USA. Another ad appeared in the *Miami Herald* (Miami, Florida) on January 23, 1962 encouraging students to apply to the “Nightingale College located on 265 N.W. 5th St., established in Miami Since 1949.” The ad begins: **Earn \$65 Week, WOMEN 18 to 60, with limited high school background, become a PHYSICIAN’S ASSISTANT IN ONLY 12 WEEKS, EXCELLENT job opportunities.**

So accordingly, the term physician's assistant was in general use in the USA for at least 100 years prior to the establishment in 1965 of the first formal education program to produce modern-day physician assistants (PAs). The term was used for caregivers, physicians in training, private duty and office-based nurses, medical assistants and graduates of proprietary trade schools and others hired and trained on-the-job. Consequently, it is understandable that the term was used generically to describe graduates from a growing variety of education programs established during the formative years of the PA profession. Most of these programs educated "PAs" to work with specialists to perform specific diagnostic or therapeutic tasks and were primarily based in hospitals. Curriculums were limited to a few months to over a year; sometime completed on-the-job. In the early 1970s, organized medicine was hard pressed to establish education and certification standards to mitigate the confusion caused by the term. In retrospect, it may have caused less confusion to have chosen a different title than physician's assistant initially. The nomenclature battle still continues to this day, both domestically and internationally. Currently, most patients refer to their physician assistants simply as PAs. After 50 plus years, they have come to understand the role PAs play in their care. So physician assistant or physician associate – PA seems to be what matters!

Resources:

Readex: A Division of NewsBank. America's Historical Newspapers. Accessed March 16, 2020 through Duke University Libraries: United States Newspapers online database,'

Piemme, TE, Sadler, Jr., AM, Carter, RD and Ballweg, R. The Physician Assistant: An Illustrated History. (2013) Arcadia Publishing, Gilbert, AZ. Copyright, Physician Assistant History Society.

Employee(s) of MGM - <http://www.doctormacro.com/Movie%20Summaries/F/Faithless.htm>