

10 Talking Points about the History of the PA Profession

1. The physician assistant (PA) profession is a social innovation that developed in the mid-20th century to address a crisis in the American health care system when demand for medical services could not be met by the current supply of physicians; especially the demand for primary care services.
2. A variety of PA educational programs sprang up in academic and health care institutions throughout the United States during the late 1960s. Curriculums ranged from a few months to four years and were designed to train PAs to work with both generalist and specialist physicians in medicine and surgery.
3. The first major pool of candidates educated as physician assistants were former military medics and corpsmen who served in Vietnam but upon discharge from active duty could not find suitable work in the civilian health sector because of restrictive state licensure requirements.
4. To gain public support, uniformity was needed, and with Federal funding, the American Medical Association (AMA), American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) and other aligned organizations joined to establish educational guidelines and methods to nationally accredit PA programs and to certify their graduates.
5. The accrediting body, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) and the certifying agency, the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), are unique in that their commissioners and trustees represent the interest of other health professional organizations and the public, not just physician assistants.
6. To obtain federal funding, established and newly developing PA programs had to be accredited, accept applicants from under-represented groups (i.e., women and minorities) educate students as generalists and place a significant number of graduates in primary care settings, especially medically underserved communities. Diversity is a key characteristic of the PA profession.
7. Four educational models emerged during the first decade and over time have become more academically uniform to meet the same accreditation standards. Their graduates are called physician assistants, surgeon assistants, MEDEX and child health associates and all sit for the same national certification examination. The programs and their graduates are represented by one unified organization each: the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) and the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), respectively.
8. Physicians, lawyers and educators developed model legislation that made an exception to a state's medical practice act to allow licensed physicians to hire qualified assistants to whom they could delegate tasks under supervision. The states' regulatory boards assumed responsibility for establishing rules and regulations and monitoring the practice. This paved the way for collaborative, team-oriented practice, another key characteristic of the PA profession.
9. Over time, the role and scope of PA practice has expanded to include prescriptive privileges and less direct supervision. PAs are now reimbursed for rendered services by both federal and private insurers. Their generalist education and certification allow PAs to work in most fields of medicine and surgery and to change fields when necessary. Flexibility is another characteristic of the PA profession.
10. PAs' autonomy is based on performance, knowledge and skills providing an opportunity for professional growth and job satisfaction. Performance Autonomy is a unique characteristic of the PA profession.