

An Office to Study, Preserve, and Present the History of the Physician Assistant Profession

*Reginald D. Carter, PhD, PA
Department of Community and Family Medicine
Duke University Medical School*

As the physician assistant (PA) profession approaches its 35th year of existence, it is time to develop strategies, processes, and procedures to assure that its history and achievements are documented and made accessible through advanced technology to members of the profession, historians, medical sociologists, researchers, and the general public. An office for the study, preservation, and presentation of PA history is being established within the Department of Community and Family Medicine at the Duke University Medical Center for this purpose. The proposed office will provide a reliable, comprehensive, and accessible source of information about the profession's unique origins, philosophy, structure, and interdependent relationship with the medical profession. As both a real and virtual repository of historic and current information on the PA profession, the office will develop policies and strategies to ensure that the profession and future scholars can easily access documents, materials, and individuals who helped shape the past, current, and future directions of the profession. The office will be a collaborative effort between the Duke University Medical Center, the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP), and the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA).

Introduction

According to Dr. Eugene Schneller ... "the PA occupation is a significant innovation in the medical division of labor ... and differs from the traditional paramedical occupations by virtue of a role based upon negotiated performance autonomy."¹ As such, the PA profession marks a turning point in the evolution of the healing arts in the United States.² In many ways, the concept is still in its infancy and its potential remains untapped for a country still seeking to manage cost while maintaining the quality of care rendered to its citizens. Although PAs have yet to reach their full potential as a health profession, they are in a favorable position to help solve many problems that still plague the United States' health system. As the profession explores new opportunities for collaborative practice, it is important that its own members and others appreciate its history, traditions, values, and mission.³

Background

The development of the PA profession has not occurred in a vacuum. It is intertwined with the complex professional relationships among the medical, nursing, and allied health professions.⁴ Clearly, the PA profession would not exist without the support and active involvement of major physician groups and other closely aligned medical organizations.³ Ironically, now that the workforce capacity of PAs and other health professionals is better able to meet the health service needs of the

American populace, there is concern about an oversupply of providers. How will PAs, whose profession originated and was justified by a shortage and maldistribution in medical personnel in the 1960s, fare with a projected oversupply of providers, especially physicians? Will the unique relationship forged between physicians and PAs over the past 35 years remain intact? As the supply of providers increases, will PAs be able to continue practicing under physician supervision with its inherent "performance autonomy" characteristics? There is little doubt that the PA profession will have to adjust and realign its membership and affiliations with physician, nursing, and managed-care health organizations to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing health-care system. Many of the tenets upon which the profession was founded are now being challenged. Professional leaders will need to make wise and careful decisions that may be unpopular but necessary to assure that the profession remains true to its mission of meeting the needs of the American populace by fulfilling a unique position in the "division" of labor of medicine.

Goals and Objectives

The office will promote the professional and personal development of physician assistants and the clinical and non-clinical roles and contributions of PAs to patient care and the health-care system. It will encourage scholarly dialogue on the benefits of team-oriented practice, changing professional roles, and the development of better models for delivering

health-care services with measurable outcomes. The office will serve as a model for other health professions. With today's modern technology, history should be alive, easily accessible, and used to guide future decision-making.

Over the next 3 years, the office will:

- Develop and maintain an integrated, online searchable archival database that identifies the existence and location of key documents, articles, books, films, oral history, audio or videotapes, and other artifacts that detail the development and evolution of the PA profession.
- Develop and maintain a Web site presenting a virtual history of the PA profession.
- Collect, house, and preserve media, documents, artifacts, and other related materials that are not currently maintained in a suitable academic or physical environment.
- Assist national PA organizations, education programs, and newsletter and journal publishers to develop educational modules, media, brochures, informational displays, articles, books, and related materials.
- Identify areas in need of more documentation; foster studies and dialogue about the PA profession.

Organization

The Office to Study, Preserve, and Present the History of the PA Profession will be a collaborative, non-profit effort involving the major PA organizations and volunteers. It will be located at the Duke University Medical Center, affiliated with the Department of Community and Family Medicine and the Medical Center's Archives and Memorabilia Office. The office will collaborate closely with the Medical Center archivist, Medical Center Library (Medical History Section), and the Educational Media Services at Duke University Medical Center. Dr. Reginald Carter will provide 80% effort as the project's director. A full-time staff assistant will assist him with administrative, database, and Web site management. An advisory board of 5 to 7 members will oversee operations, evaluate performance, and identify items for inclusion in the database. The board will include representatives from the major PA organizations and include a medical archivist (historian) and medical sociologist.

Methods

A search will begin immediately to identify and locate the major collections housing documents, photographs, films, books, memorabilia, and artifacts that cover the full range of AAPA, APAP, NCCPA, PA Foundation, ARC-PA initiatives and activities that have contributed to the development, organization, and mission of the PA profession. An advisory

board will identify key people, subjects, and topics for inclusion in the database. Individuals who helped establish the AAPA, APAP, NCCPA, PA Foundation, and ARC-PA and who helped develop accreditation, legislation, and national certification processes and procedures will be contacted to determine if they have personal papers, photographs, or related materials to be included in the database or added to the archives. Once materials are identified and located, they will be cataloged, cross-indexed, and entered into the database with key subject and topic words to allow online searching. Photographs, films, videotapes, and oral history audiotapes will be stored and preserved electronically for future use. Some of these documents and materials will be featured on the PA history home page and in professional publications.

Documents and materials that do not have a suitable home will be collected, cataloged, and placed in the Medical History Section of the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The NLM already houses the archives of the AAPA and it would be prudent to house as many original documents as possible in a centralized location, especially one maintained by professional archivists and medical historians. In addition to these hard copies, an electronic copy of key documents and materials will be maintained and made available over the Internet or by CD-ROM to those needing access to these documents but who cannot visit the NLM in person to review the originals.

To help with the workload and identification process, guidelines and templates will be provided to those who are willing to help locate, identify, catalog, and index materials residing in their own organizations, institutions, personal papers, archives, or libraries. The intent is to elicit the help of others in the development of the database. Announcements will be placed in PA publications requesting such assistance and to encourage individuals to share their anecdotes and memorabilia with the office. Articles will be published to stimulate interest and specific requests will be made for missing items. There is a vast amount of material residing in institutional and individual files that will be lost if corrective action is not taken soon. The office will use e-mail and an interactive Web site to make communication and the submission of materials easy. Electronic reproductions will be accepted and encouraged.

As a parallel effort, a Web site will be established and maintained to present the virtual history of the PA profession. This Web site will contain an illustrated history of the PA profession, including timelines and highlights. Pictures and biographical data of leaders who helped develop the profession will be featured and linked appropriately to major initiatives and activities. Video and audio segments will provide viewers an opportunity to see and hear these leaders in action. Viewers will be able to see the original charters of the AAPA and the APAP, to see early editions of newsletters, brochures, announcements of early meetings, badges, pins marketing the

profession, the first attempts at establishing a code of ethics for the profession, and much more.

Once identified, located, properly stored, and captured electronically, the archival materials will be featured and exhibited at the AAPA Annual Conference and at other selected national and regional meetings. This collection will tell the story of the development and impact that PAs have had on American medicine. The advisory board will help identify areas needing more documentation and study. The office will use a network of contacts based in various PA organizations and PA educational programs to gather missing documents and to initiate studies needed to fill gaps of understanding. The office will encourage, foster, and support original research that explores key themes underlying inter-professional relationships, policy decisions, and other activities crucial to the development and expansion of the PA profession.

Timeline

The intent is to have the office established and operational by July 1, 2001. The amount of funds made available will dictate how quickly the office can become fully operational, develop the archival database, establish the Web site to host the PA history home page, and begin collecting and preserving documents, photographs, films, video, audio tapes, and other artifacts and memorabilia.

Financial Considerations

During its first three years of operation, the office will require \$638,897 to operate and develop a small reserve fund. Sources of funding include but are not limited to the following:

- Matching funds and in-kind services from the Department of Community and Family Medicine and Medical Center Archives and Memorabilia, Duke University Medical Center.
- Matching funds and in-kind services from major PA organizations – American Academy of PAs (AAPA), National Commission for Certification of PAs (NCCPA), and Association of PA Programs (APAP).
- Major foundation grant(s), corporate, and individual sponsors.
- Reimbursement for services rendered.

Other possible sources of revenue and support include the following:

- Annual contributors (individual and corporate sponsors) interested in preserving PA history, maintaining a newsletter and PA illustrated history home page.
- Individuals and organizations requesting help in developing exhibits or producing videos, slides, or other media will be charged for services rendered.
- Educational materials used by students or used for CME could be produced and sold as a potential source of revenue.
- The Advisory Board will assist researchers in securing external funding for research projects, solicit funds for the office, and develop strategies for future financial viability.

Current Status

The proposal has been approved for funding by the Department of Community and Family Medicine, the AAPA, NCCPA, and APAP. Professional, institutional, individual, and corporate contributions and pledges currently total 30% of the \$638,897 required to open the office in July 2001. A prototype Web site will be launched in January 2001 to describe and market the proposal to potential contributors. To be successful, the office will need both financial and volunteer support from the PA community. If you are interested in supporting this project, please contact the author at the following mail or e-mail address; Department of Community and Family Medicine, Duke University Medical School, Physician Assistant Program, CFM – Box 3848, Durham, NC 27710-0001; carte001@mc.duke.edu.

References

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