Issue Brief

Hiring a PA

The Benefits for Physicians and Practices

PAs work in concert with physicians to ensure the best possible care for patients in every practice setting. Their rigorous medical education, versatility, and commitment to personalized care help traditional practices function more fully and enhance continuity of care in the managed care environment. The many benefits PAs offer employers are "just what the doctor ordered" — higher patient satisfaction levels, increased revenues, and more flexible, forgiving work schedules.

The physician-PA team enhances medicine because PAs are educated as clinical partners to provide physician-directed medical care. If you are a physician, imagine the elegant efficiency of working with a clinically educated assistant who can provide a wide range of medical procedures, at your direction and discretion. It is rather like gaining an extra pair of eyes and hands, not to mention hours in the week for research, difficult cases, or other interests.

Physicians may delegate to PAs those medical duties that are within the physician's scope of practice and the PA's training and experience, and are allowed by law. PAs provide a broad range of diagnostic and therapeutic services, from primary care to surgical procedures. In their work with physicians, PAs routinely perform physical exams and take patient histories, order and interpret laboratory tests, manage and treat illnesses, repair lacerations and assist in surgery, write prescriptions in almost every state, and provide health education and patient counseling.

Easing Physician Workloads

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of hiring a PA is that a PA can shift the physician's workload. With a PA handling routine office visits, rounds, and call, the physician is freed to manage more complex cases. PAs improve patient flow. PAs can see walk-ins, urgent care cases, and routine follow-up visits such as well-child visits, diabetes care, and hypertension management. In emergency departments, PAs provide both trauma and fast track care.

Achieving greater practice efficiency by employing PAs is also supported by the American Medical Association's Socioeconomic Monitoring System survey, which in 1994 measured the benefits of employing "nonphysician practitioners" (NPPs), including PAs, nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, and certified nurse-midwives. The survey found that solo practice physicians experienced expanded practice, greater efficiency, and greater access to care for their patients when they employed an NPP. Physicians who employed NPPs were able to work one week less per year on average, while supplying more hours in office visits and patient care and increasing net income by nearly 18 percent. Of the four NPP groups in the study, PAs rated highest in terms of patient productivity and patient acceptance.

Flexibility is an important PA attribute. Because PAs receive strong clinical education, they are ready to serve in many health care settings. Need an extra set of qualified hands in the operating room and on the surgical ward? Does your waiting room look like a subway station during rush

hour? Adding a physician assistant to your team could help. Want to extend your clinic hours to accommodate the needs of working families? A PA may be the answer.

As one family physician writing in *Family Practice Management* describes the physician assistant's role in the practice, "The PA makes himself invaluable by smoothing the ebbs and flows of our daily workload.… We wonder how any practice can thrive without one."

PA Cost-effectiveness

The health care system, institutions, and individual practices can realize considerable savings when PAs are fully utilized. According to the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), PAs generate revenues covering far more than what their compensation costs employers. MGMA collects data annually comparing PA compensation with their gross charges. According to the data from 2002, for every dollar of charges a primary care PA generates for the practice, the employer pays on average 28 cents to employ the PA. For surgical PAs, the employer pays 32 cents for every dollar of charges generated. (Physician Compensation and Production Survey, 2003 Report Based on 2002 Data, Colorado, 2003. Reprinted with permission from the Medical Group Management Association, 104 Inverness Terrace East, Englewood, Colorado 80112-5306; 303-799-1111.)

Boosting Patient Satisfaction

Hiring a PA enhances patient satisfaction in several respects. With a PA on staff, patient waiting times are lessened, improving patient satisfaction through increased access to care. No physician can be available to patients every moment of every day. Physician assistants, as part of a team, enhance continuity of care and patient compliance.

Patients need to know about prevention strategies, medication regimens, follow-up plans, newborn care, diet and exercise, and side effects to watch for. PAs can fill an important role as patient health educators, overseeing nutrition and exercise programs for weight management, hypertension, diabetes, and smoking cessation programs.

Recent studies conducted by the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research found patient satisfaction levels with physician assistants high, ranging between 89 and 96 percent. Aspects of patient satisfaction examined by the study included interpersonal care, confidence in provider, and understanding of patient problems. (*The Permanente Journal*, Summer 1997.)

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AAPA Resources

The AAPA is the pre-eminent source of information on the physician assistant profession. Visit AAPA on the Web at *www.aapa.org*. AAPA's updated guide for PA employers, *Hiring a Physician Assistant*, features a wealth of information detailing the many benefits of employing PAs, along with guidance on team practice, contract negotiation, practice agreements, and many other topics. To order, please visit AAPA's On-line Store at *www.aapa.org/aapastore* or call 703/787-8044. The cost is $50. For classified advertising information, visit the Employer Resources section of the AAPA Web site at *www.aapa.org/joblink/employers.html* or contact Russell Johns Associates at 800/237-9851; fax, 727/445-9380; e-mail, *aapa@rja-ads.com*.

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