

THE EVOLUTION OF TRAINING AND PRACTICE OF PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTSHIP IN GHANA

Author Profiles:

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General Information:

The history of Physician Assistants Profession started in 1923 during the colonial era, under Sir Gordon Guggisberg then governor of the Gold Coast and the PAs were referred as "Dressers." According to Professor Rexford Kofi Oduro Asante, one of the founding Principals of the bachelor Degree Program at Ghana's Central University, PA training originated from the "Dressers" training. This was started silently at Saltpond in the Central Region of Ghana

The professional training of Physician Assistants (formerly called Medical Assistants) officially started in Ghana with the establishment of the Rural Health Training College in 1969 though previous attempts to start training the profession occurred before 1960. (Adjase, 2015).

The Physician Assistant (PA) is a professional group in the health service system with a level of training apt and appropriate for the basic and essential health care needs of the people of Ghana. Though with less emphasis on high levels of technical sophistication in the initial phases of the program, the professional training of this group of health professionals has evolved, to include high levels of expertise and skills. The PA profession in Ghana is economical in cost yet efficient in quality.

#### Entry Criteria:

Entry into the program requires the following:

Direct Entry (Bachelor Degree (Hons) in Physician Assistantship

- Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE) or West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE)
  - General Science only
  - At least credits in Core English, Science and Mathematics
  - At least Credits in 3 elective courses (Biology, Chemistry, Physics or Elective Maths)
  - Overall Aggregate of 12 or better

Post – Basic Entry (Bachelor Degree (Hons) in Physician Assistantship

- Must be a Registered Professional Nurse (RMN, RGN, RM) with Diploma with not less than 3 years post qualification experience
- Nursing Degree holders do not require three years post qualification experience
- Holders of Advanced Diploma in Community Medicine and Health or Advanced Diploma in Physician Assistantship do not require post qualifications experience
- Holders of Bachelor Degree in the sciences such as Laboratory technology, human biology, biological sciences, Pharmacy, chemistry, etc
- There is no required entry examination to enter the program.

#### Education:

The PA training is a four (4) year didactic and clinical programme designed with foundational, introductory, and clinical courses with an additional one (1) year post-graduation mandatory internship with approximately 100 students admitted per year per Institution. PA Training begins with a strong foundational courses in the sciences such as advanced chemistry, biochemistry, physics, nursing, basic computer science, African studies, information skills, microbiology. These foundational courses are the building blocks for introductory courses such as clinical anatomy, physiology, pathophysiology, pathology, clinical biochemistry, applied pharmacology, basic epidemiology, statistics, diagnostic imaging and laboratory medicine. The student is then prepared for the clinical courses such as internal medicine, emergency medicine, general surgery and traumatology, public and community health medicine, paediatrics, child health, reproductive health, obstetrics and gynaecology, health systems research, medical ethics and law, health system management, project work, preceptorship and clerkship. These courses are structured to fit the need of the population.

The evolution of Physician Assistantship training in Ghana had seen a significant boost in recent years. The program evolved from a certificate to an advanced diploma and now a bachelor's degree (BSc). Additionally, it has shifted from the traditional ways of only training nurses as PAs to senior high school graduates' training. The latter has been a substantial breakthrough in the advancement of the profession. Moreover, there have been attempts to introduce master and specialization PA programs in psychiatry and dermatology.

At the time of writing this article there were 15 PA accredited programs (5 public and 10 private institutions) in Ghana. (*PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT TRAINING INSTITUTIONS IN GHANA & PROGRAMMES - Medical & Dental Council* Medical & Dental Council, n.d.) Academic certificates are awarded by the Institutions/Colleges/Universities that have been completed.

Table 1: Educational Institutions in Ghana

1.College of Health and Well-Being, Kintampo (Public)
2.Yamfo College of Health, Yamfo (Public)
3.Central University (Private)
4.Anglican Technical University, Nkoranza (Private)
5.Christian University College (Private)
6.Garden City University (Private)
7.Presbyterian University College (Private)
8.Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Public)
9.University of Cape Coast (Public)
10.Alpha College and Technology (Private)
11.University of Health and Allied Sciences (Public)
12.Radford University (Private)
13.Nar-Bita College (Private)
14.Pentecost University (Private)
15.Princefield University College (Private)

#### Financing Education:

Public Institutional establishments and programs (e.g College of Health, Kintampo; College of Health, Yamfo, University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) are financed by government of Ghana through the Ministry of Health. Private Institutional establishments and accredited PA programs are financed by private entities.

#### Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

Academic and Professional Accreditation is by the National Accreditation Board, National Council for Tertiary Education and the Ghana Medical and Dental Council.

<http://www.nab.gov.gh/>

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Accra- Ghana

The profession is regulated by Medical and Dental Council for Ghana.

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The profession is fully recognized by the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Labour (MOL) all work together to support the profession.

#### Professional Licensure:

To obtain a license the students must pass a Final Post-clerkship Examination (Academic certification) and then pass a Licentiate Examination for Physician Assistants (Professional certification) conducted by the Ghana Medical and Dental Council after obtaining the required academic CGPA

The *Medical and Dental Council* for Ghana who regulates PAs' practice, also conducts licensure/licentiate examinations (*PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT TRAINING INSTITUTIONS IN GHANA & PROGRAMMES - Medical & Dental Council* Medical & Dental Council, n.d.).

The Medical and Dental Council also certifies Physician Assistants to practice after they have passed their licencing examination. An up to date database of practicing PAs may be found at [www.mdcghana.org](http://www.mdcghana.org).

#### Scope of Practice:

The PA training blends the components of curative (clinical), preventive and promotional (public health), and administrative services, thus making the PAs very versatile health human resource and epitomizes efficiency in human resource crises. PAs in Ghana have three distinct groups of healthcare professionals trained in medicine and dentary: PA-Medical (known as medical assistants), PA-Dental (known as community oral health officers), and PA-Anesthesia (known as nurse anesthetist) (Adjase, 2015). PAs practice in rural and urban settings in Ghana. They could be found in Health Centres, Polyclinics, District/ Municipal Hospitals, and sometimes in the regional and tertiary hospitals. PAs have the responsibility for the health of about 70% of the Ghanaian population.

Furthermore, PAs have a lead role in the Sub-District Systems operations, the functional unit of Health Care Delivery, and Health Policy dissemination. PAs in Ghana are not supervised by a physician, and the educational model is designed to complement the physician training. PAs are primarily based in rural areas of the country and serve the population's primary healthcare needs. They function as a pillar from which the Ghana Health Service derives its strength. PAs play a major role in health care delivery and may continue to do so for a long time with the unending crisis in the high-level workforce. The need to fine-tune and broaden the scope of operation of the PA workforce by way of capacity building is paramount and could be a very cost-effective attempt at addressing the crisis in the health care workforce in Ghana. PAs are authorized to prescribe and it's facility level-dependent (Level A to C).

The range of duties and responsibilities of the Physician Assistant further includes among others:

- Administration of the Sub- District
- Facility level management including Logistics, Human Resource and Financial Management
- Clinical Case Management at Health Centres, Polyclinics and Hospital OPDs
- Provision of Primary Eye, Oral and ENT Care, Diagnosis and

- Management of Minor Surgical problems such as Simple Fractures, First Degree Burns, Incision and Drainage, Suturing, Excision, etc. and referrals to appropriate bodies.

#### Maintaining Role:

Certified PAs are required to complete yearly Continuous Professional Development (CPD) [known as CMEs] by attending a set of medical events as certified/accredited by the Medical and Dental Council of Ghana (Driver-Jowitt, 2015) (*PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT TRAINING INSTITUTIONS IN GHANA & PROGRAMMES - Medical & Dental Council*, n.d.). The purpose of the CPD is to assist PAs in maintaining and enhancing their knowledge, skills, and competencies in the medical field. Furthermore, the PA profession is fully recognized by the Ministry of Health of Ghana.

#### Job Opportunities:

Currently about 3500 PAs are permanently and provisionally registered. Ghana Health service and other agencies of MoH, Ghana mental Health Authority, employ over 2500 PAs and over 500 PAs maybe in private practice

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