

India Physician Assistants

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Anitha Chandrasekhar graduated through the BITS-MMM Physician Assistant program, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, with specialization in cardiothoracic surgery. She has a rich experience of over 17 years in cardiac surgery being involved in adult, pediatric and neonatal cardiac surgical procedures spanning the entire spectrum of congenital, coronary, valvular surgeries, aortic surgeries, heart & lung transplants, assist device implantations as well as thoracic surgeries. Her special interests include congenital cardiac surgeries, valve repairs, ECMO, Redo-surgeries and cardiac transplantations. She is the first surgical PA in the country to be part of more than 100 donor heart harvesting.

She has presented many scientific papers in national and international cardiac surgical conferences and won awards. She is actively involved in cardiovascular research for development of organ care system. She is a faculty for many educational programs, PA conferences and cardiac surgical meets. She served as Senior Vice president of the Indian Association of Physician Assistants for 3 years and a Task force member of the National curriculum standardization of Physician Assistant education in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. She also serves as the first International Board member of the American Association of Physician Assistants in Cardiovascular surgery as well as a member of the editorial board and peer reviewer for their journal. She is a certified Cardiac Advanced Life Support provider and trainer and is one of the first faculty of the CALS-India program. She is also a faculty mentor of the International federation of Physician Assistant Comparable student's association (IFPACS).

General Information:

The PA program in India took its birth in the year 1992 at a private, tertiary healthcare institute in Chennai, India. It was born out of the necessity to fulfil the vacancies due to the constant exodus of resident doctors in pursuit of higher education. This, along with the rising disease burden, led to the introduction of PAs in India to even out the imbalance in health care delivery. Inspired by the success of PA profession in the United States, Dr. K. M. Cherian, renowned cardiac surgeon,

believed that a similar profession might mitigate the problem of the floating population of resident doctors. After his return from USA, Dr. Cherian introduced the PA concept in India by starting the PA program in Chennai in the year 1992 at the Institute of Cardiovascular disease as a Diploma program and the first PA graduated in 1994. Subsequently, a 2-year Master's degree PA program was started. In 1996, an integrated 4-year undergraduate bachelor's degree course was established. Soon PA profession proved to be a vital workforce in the institute. The physicians who were exposed to this concept spread the message to other health care institutes. PAs were found to be of immense use in whichever institute they worked. Anticipating the demand of this profession in health care arena, more institutions started the program in collaboration with reputed universities across the country.

Entry Criteria:

Criteria for application includes Pass in the Higher Secondary (10+2) or equivalent examination recognized by any Indian University or a duly constituted Board with at least 50% marks in Physics, Chemistry and Biology (in each of the subjects). Separate entrance examinations followed by viva are conducted by individual centers for candidate selection. As this degree was offered after high school completion, there is no stipulated requirement of clinical experience.

Education:

Currently, more than 50 programs are offered in the country affiliated to around 12 universities across the country, the most popular being the 4-years bachelor program with 3 years of coursework and 1 year of internship. Over 3000 PAs have graduated till date.

The initial program established at the Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases trained PAs in general medical curriculum with a special focus in cardiology and cardiac surgery. The trained PAs were employed in clinical evaluation of patients, cardiovascular diagnostics, cardiac surgery and post-operative care. Impressed by the utility of PAs in focused care, the PA training was adopted in many other centers with focus on all branches of medicine. This focused and specialized training made them evolve as an integral and efficient workforce within the hospital team.

Most programs in India are graduate programs with duration being three or four years. Courses taught universally across the many programs are: anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, microbiology, pharmacology, English, computer education, medicine, surgery, and pediatrics. The other courses offered depend on the needs of the institution and focus on some of specialty medicine such as cardiology, cardiac surgery, orthopedics, neurology etc., The curriculum is didactic in design with equal emphasis to theory and practical orientation. Both Master's and Bachelor's degrees are able to be obtained in the country.

Financing Education:

The program is generally self-funded. There are no merits/scholarships available for students.

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

There are no accrediting or regulatory bodies for the profession in India at the current time. The government has included the physician assistant cadre as one of the seven health care professionals in the formation of the National Allied and Health care Professionals Council. The

Ministry of Health has wholeheartedly acknowledged the profession and offered support for standardization of the PA education and practice through the council. The Indian Association of Physician Assistants is closely working with the Ministry of Health, Government of India to establish the council soon. The IAPA leadership represented the PA cadre for the proposed Allied Health and Healthcare professionals bill, October 2019. The bill is soon to be tabled in the parliament and delayed only due to the ongoing pandemic.

Regulatory bodies:

Currently, there are no regulatory bodies for regulation of PA education and practice. Need of the hour is a regulatory body for standardization of the PA course and profession like an Allied Health council, which is in the pipeline.

Professional organization:

The Indian Association of Physician Assistants (IAPA) is a registered, non-profitable body, founded in 1998 to assist physician assistants (PAs) to gain academic and professional excellence. The mission of IAPA is to promote excellence in medical knowledge and skills of PAs and to provide educational resources in support of that goal. The IAPA liaisons with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, in standardizing the PA curriculum and setting of professional standards.

Professional Licensure:

There is no licensing of PAs available currently or searchable database to find PAs in country. There are currently no certifying examinations for PAs in India. However, cardiac surgical physician assistants, who dominate the profession in India, are being certified by the National cardiac surgeon's parent body- Indian association of cardiothoracic and vascular surgeons via a separate examination conducted by leading cardiac surgeons who help the PA cause. This exam is diligently and meticulously conducted at the annual conference of the Indian association physician assistants every year. MCQs are taken in the forenoon and those who clear the exam are shortlisted for a viva following which, successful candidates are awarded a certificate. The certificates are issued during the following IACTS annual conference.

Other specialties like cardiology, neurology, pediatrics etc are encouraged to adopt the same model by approaching the national association of the doctors of their respective specialty to conduct certifying examinations to maintain a basic standard.

Scope of Practice:

A PA expands the skills mix, enabling the physician to care for more complex patients thus practicing at the highest level of their scope of practice. As dependent practitioners, the PA works with physicians, however with time and increased experience, can have increasing independent decision-making responsibilities (as per the comfort of the physician). In places where there is paucity of physicians, PAs may have to work with little onsite supervision / remote support (supervision through phone, computer or telemedicine).

Integral to the PA development and practice is the Physician-PA relationship. The PA profession was founded on the concept of this team practice. The scope of PA practice is not only based on the training and experience of the PA but also on the scope of the employing physician and the

role and extent of practice that are mutually agreed upon between the two. Within the Physician-PA relationship, the PAs exercise autonomy in medical decision making. The quality of care provided by them is comparable to that of physicians.

Physician assistants work in all specialties and departments and are available on call 24/7. Due to the increasing complexity and proliferation of medical services available today, PAs essentially replace the junior doctor and serve as the in-house officer on duty.

Physician assistants are engaged in the outpatient wing, in wards and critical care units, in operation theatres and other super specialty units like cardiovascular and thoracic surgery, cardiology, orthopedics, neurology, liver transplant units, reproductive medicine, endocrinology, pulmonology, GI Surgery, head and neck and plastic surgery, nephrology, gastroenterology, urology, oncology, nuclear medicine etc.

The knowledge of medicine and communication skills make PAs an ideal option for taking the lead in preventive medicine. They can be utilized in conducting camps for screening and diagnosis and offer CME/lectures/counselling to the general public to create increased awareness of diseases and aim at prevention. Owing to shortage of doctors and time constraints, this important area of medicine is often neglected. Physician Assistants can effectively and efficiently pitch in and redeem this aspect of medicine and thus offer a strong support system for public health care management.

PAs are not licensed to prescribe medications in India.

Maintaining Role:

Continuing Medical Education/Continuing Professional Development (CME/CPD) is not required for PAs at this time.

Job Opportunities:

Currently there are plenty of job opportunities as a PA in the country in more than 10 specializations. Each state has specific requirement in specified clinical setting. Job vacancies for PAs are advertised in multiple portals these days, spread through word of mouth and National PA forum.

References:

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