

## Liberia Physician Assistants

### Author profile:

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The author, Jerry Kollie is Physician Assistant (PA) with extensive clinical and administrative experience from Liberia. He received his Physician Assistant training from the Tubman National Institute of Medical Arts (TNIMA) in Liberia. He is also a Public Health Specialist with clinical and administrative experiences in health program development and delivery in a number of areas including maternal health, nutrition, reproductive health and family planning and human resource development and management. He has extensive experience in the public health management of programs in infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Mr. Kollie has worked for several institutions in different capacities allowing him to develop a skillset that includes effective communication skills, capacity building and facilitation skills, development of a solid understanding of grant and proposal writing and good financial management. Additionally, he has experience in program monitoring and evaluation, health sciences research, effective report writing, and budget forecasting.

By holding a number of leadership roles, Mr. Kollie has been instrumental in the development of recognition and organization of the profession in Liberia. He is the immediate past president of the Liberia National Physician Assistants Association (LINPAA), a founding member of the Global Association of Clinical Officers and Physician Associates (GACOPA) and the West Africa Association of Physician Assistants (WAAPA). In addition, he is a member and the former acting Chairman of the Board of the National Health Workers Association of Liberia (NAHWAL) now, the National Health Workers Union of Liberia (NAHWUL) and founder and first chairperson of the board of the Liberia Allied Health Sciences Board (LAHSB), founding member of the Liberia Immunization Platform (LIP), founder and CEO of the Zorzor District Training Institute (ZDTI) and the God's Grace Institute of Professional Development (GGIPD).

### General Information:

The establishment of the Physician Assistant (PA) profession in Liberia is far dated as 1964. Its establishment was initiated by the Government of Liberia with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF after they realized the need for well-trained and highly qualified health care providers in addition to nurses in rural and remote areas of the country.

#### Entry Criteria:

To apply to a PA Program, the following criteria must be met: the applicant must be a high school graduate with both high school Diploma and the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) Certificate, apply for enrollment, successfully complete an entrance exam and interview (recently introduced 6 years ago). The entrance exam is unique to each program and typically covers content in English, math and general science. After these requirements are completed, the applicant must complete medical examination at the nation's referral hospital (JFKMC) under the guidance of the institution's management and if declared medically fit, register and begin studies. No clinical experience is required for entry. These processes or required steps are basically for TNIMA and the private institutions have similar but slightly different processes.

#### Education:

The Tubman National Institute of Medical Arts (TNIMA) began as an independent program in 1965, where the training consisted of two years of theory and practical content. Upon completion of the program, the graduates earned a diploma and were immediately assigned to rural parts of the country. The two-year program lasted for approximately 10 years, until 1975. Then, in 1976, the training was scaled up from two to three years, into a model that is still utilized today.

Besides TNIMA, the original Government of Liberia owned and operated training institution for PAs in Liberia, there are two others recently established private institutions training PAs at Associate and bachelor's degree levels. The first is the Baptist College of Physician Assistants, which is in Gbarnga, Bong County, owned by the Baptist Church and established and managed by an American PA, Steve Trexler. This institution is a three-year program and confers an Associate degree. The second program is the Cuttington University Physician Assistants Program in Suacoco, Bong County. The four-year training program at this private institution confers a bachelor's degree. On average, 20 new PAs are graduated in Liberia each year.

#### Financing Education:

The methods of financing education for the PA profession in Liberia depends upon the type of institution that offers the degree. Government owned institutions do not require students to pay tuition, however private institutions require the students pay tuition fees via money they earn during school breaks or gifted by family members.

#### Accreditation/Regulatory Bodies:

In Liberia, PA Programs are accredited by the Division of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health (MOH).

The programs are regulated by the Physician Assistant Board of the Liberia National Physician Assistants Association (LINPAA), JFK Medical Board, and by extension Liberian Medical and Dental Council (LMDC)

through the Liberia Allied Health Sciences Board –LAHSB (which is an umbrella organization for PAs, Mental Health Clinicians, Operating Room Technicians, Environmental Health Technicians, etc.), and Ministry of Health.

The PA training institutions are recognized and certified by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Health. As a result of this recognition, LINPAA and their board are duly recognized by the Ministry of Health and all health-related institutions (National and international). Previously, there was a PA division at the Ministry of Health with a PA as director who was responsible to monitor and supervise all the practices of PAs in country.

#### Professional Licensure:

The Liberia National Physician Assistant Association (LINPAA) has two parts. The executive part is headed by the president and is responsible for the daily management of the institution. The second part is headed by the chairperson of the board and is responsible for administration of the certifying board examination, supervision of the activities of the executives, issuing practicing licenses and monitoring and supervision of the practicing PAs to ensure their work is in line with their scope of practice.

Successful completion of the Board Licensing Examination is necessary to obtain a license. The LINPAA administers board exams once a year and during that time, all newly graduated PAs and those PAs who were unsuccessful on their first attempt may register and sit for the exams. After the successful completion of the exams, practicing licenses and board certificates are issued, legally authorizing them to practice the profession in Liberia. The license is subject to annual renewal, but the board certificate is only required for initial certification.

#### Scope of Practice:

- Responsible for the provision of clinical services and the overall management of activities at the clinics, health centers/health posts and some hospitals
- Coordination and supervision of the community health team, serving as a “Community change agent” for improving community health
- Responsible to the CHO/Medical Director and supervises the health team at clinics, health centers and community level
- Supervise and / or provide clinical services for all patients
- Conduct health education for individuals, families and communities
- Assess, diagnose and treats common ailments or diseases treatable at the community, clinics and health center levels, including Malaria, STI, HIV & TB
- Provide prevention, curative and rehabilitative for all patients
- Perform minor surgical and emergencies procedures within his/ her limitations as according to the PA Scope of Practice
- Provide initial care as needed before referral of medical, obstetrical and surgical emergencies and complications beyond his scope of practice
- Refer and follow –up management of patients with chronic diseases
- Perform simple laboratory tests when necessary
- Provide Antenatal, including PMTCT and MIP services, postpartum and neonatal services and conducts deliveries
- Provides information, counseling and other services for all birth spacing/family planning; methods (including postpartum contraception and LAM)

- Assist in training, supervising, conducting in- service education for gCHVs
- Determine catchment areas, towns and population; and establish and maintain cordial relationship between the health facility and catchment area
- Encourage community support for the maintenance and operation of the clinics and health centers
- Supervise and maintain clinical records for all patients attending the clinic and health center
- Prescribes medication in accordance with scope of practice
- Maintain a stock of drugs and supplies by:
  - Take inventory and order for drugs and other medical supplies on a regular basis
  - Teach appropriate staff to operate equipment properly
  - Establish a program of regular preventive maintenance
- Oversees the collection, analysis and use of data at the health facility for decision making and sharing for effective feedback and resource mobilization
- Assess and plan for utilization of transportation resources
- Establish and maintain good working relationship with health center/clinic staff
- Serve as leader of Quality Improvement (QI) Team at the clinics or health centers and implement assessment using QI Clinical standards as appropriate

#### Maintaining Role:

Liberia is yet to develop or require continuous professional development. In fact, there is no career progression for PAs in Liberia and as such, many PAs are diverting from the profession to other professions outside of healthcare and thus, reducing the already small number of PAs in country.

#### Job Opportunities:

Since the inception of the PAs program in Liberia, approximately 3,000 highly qualified professionals have been trained who had and are still providing their quota to their mother land.

At the government level, there is an average of 20 available jobs annually and at private institutions there is an average of 50 available jobs annually.

#### References:

1. Oliphant, J. PAs in Liberia: Challenges and Opportunities. Clinician Reviews. 2015 September; 25(9)