

A Brief Overview of Physician Assistants in the United States

Author Profiles:

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Mary Showstark is a PA (physician assistant) an Assistant Professor at the Yale School of Medicine Physician Assistant Online Program and an affiliate faculty member of the Yale Institute of Global Health and Director of Virtual Interprofessional Education (VIPE). Showstark's clinical experience is in trauma surgery, emergency medicine, urgent care and disaster medicine & preparedness for the U.S. Federal government, mass gatherings, & NGOs. Showstark has worked in event medicine and concierge services around the world, working for the professional surfers, Tough Mudder, Burning Man, NYC & Paris Marathons setting up medical and disaster plans. Showstark worked in Haiti, Nepal, Mexico Beach, Cucuta/Venezuela, Bahamas, responding to natural disasters and humanitarian crises providing medical care in rural and austere environments. She has worked the State of the Union for President Obama and President Trump's inauguration medical team.

Mary Showstark is involved in growing the healthcare workforce for the PA profession globally. She is Director of New Development for PAs for Global Health, a global ambassador to the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), liaison to Euro-PAC, communications lead for International Academy of PA Educators (IAPAE) and consults with the World Health Organization on the Global Framework for Universal Healthcare to support the 2030 agenda. She is also the creator of the International Federation of Physician Assistant/Physician Associate and Clinical Officer/Clinical Associate/Comparable Students' Association (IFPACS). Showstark is working with Interprofessional.Global to rewrite the WHO guidelines on interprofessional health.

David Mittman, PA, DFAAPA



David (Dave) E. Mittman has served in numerous PA leadership roles over the last 30 years, including serving on the AAPA Board of Directors, the AAPA House of Delegates (HOD), and various state Chapters, specialty organizations and special interest groups. Most recently, he served as on the AAPA Board of Directors from 2015-2018 as director-at-large, after previously serving in the same role in the early 1980s.

Mittman also was a leader for the PA profession in medical publishing and communications, launching journals and web community for PAs. Based in Boynton Beach, Fla., Mittman is currently editor-in-chief of Clinician1, an online community for PAs and NPs, which he launched in 2009. A prolific writer on the value and practice of PAs, Mittman practiced in primary care in Brooklyn for nearly a decade before beginning his career working in medical publishing and communications as a platform to educate the healthcare industry on who PAs are and what they do. He cofounded Clinician Reviews, the first industry publication to serve both PAs and NPs, as well as seven other medical publications.

Mittman is a veteran of the profession, known for the groundbreaking and formative roles he played in the PA profession's infancy. He was the first PA allowed to practice in the Air Force Reserves, was a founding student member of the New York State Society of PAs (NYSSPA) and led the march on the "March on Trenton" to the New Jersey State House, which ultimately resulted in establishing PA practice in the state. Mittman was also one of the first PAs to co- manage and later manage his own patient panel in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As the profession matured, Mittman has continued leading efforts that challenge the status quo, such as co-founding PAs for Tomorrow and the American College of Clinicians, which advocated for greater PA-NP collaboration.

Mittman has been honored for his work with a number of awards, including AAPA's Public Education Award and both the NYSSPA and the New Jersey State Society of PAs Lifetime Achievement awards. He has also been recognized by the PA History Society.

General Information:

The PA profession was established in 1965 at Duke University in North Carolina. The first four graduates were Navy Corpsmen (military medical experience). Upon graduation in 1967, they all started practicing at Duke University. Today, there are approximately 150,000 PAs practicing across all 50 states in the US (NCCPA, state information 2020). PAs have more than 400 million patient interactions per year (2019 AAPA Salary Survey). The profession in America is now very well-established.

There is increasing specialization with 75% of the practicing PAs specialize (AAPA, 2016). There is an increasing proportion of women with over 69% of all PAs; 73% of students are women (AAPA/PAEA, 2016). PAs demonstrate high levels of patient acceptance, quality of care, and clinical flexibility. All PAs must graduate from an ARC-PA accredited program to practice in the USA, which means that PAs that intend to work in the US must train at a US university. There are no bridging programs at the current moment that allow for PAs from other countries to work in the US as a PA. The PA education training would need to be repeated.

Entry Criteria:

All students must have a four-year high school diploma degree and a 4-year Bachelor's degree before entering their Master's degree level PA program. Most, but not all, programs require around 2,000 hours of hands-on patient care experience before admission of a student. This experience can range from a scribe, an RN or military corpsman but this varies per program. Some programs require Graduate

Record Examination (GRE) exam or a specific Science GPA. Other programs have specific requirements that can be found on the individual PA program's website.

Education:

There are 268 PA programs in the US. (ARC-PA 2020) <http://www.arc-pa.org/program-accreditation-status/> PA education and training is 24- 36 months on average. The current terminal degree is a Master's. Currently there are 6 post-graduate doctoral programs for PAs. The predominant degree granted is the Doctorate in Medical Science (DMSc). These programs offer intensive study and focus on administration, leadership, education, and clinical education in specific specialties.

PA Program Curriculum: The first year of study consists of didactic work (12-14 months). The remaining 12-18 months are spent in full time clinical rotations. Rotations are typically in primary care, emergency medicine, pediatrics, OBGYN, surgery, internal medicine, psychiatry, and typically two elective specialties chosen by the student. Each rotation varies from 4-16 weeks long.

Financing Education:

Private and Public schools exist. Generally, the student pays the full tuition which can range from \$90,000-\$160,000 for tuition. As most PAs are not able to work while in school, PAs must take out loans for tuition, housing, food and transportation. The debt load upon graduation has pushed many students into higher paying specialties (surgery, emergency medicine, dermatology). Some students can have their tuition paid for by giving back a number of years in government/military service.

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

PA programs are accredited by the The Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant.

Regulatory body/Professional organizations: AAPA, PAEA, NCCPA, ARC-PA, state chapters, state licensing boards

Table 1: About American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA):

<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Founded in 1968, the American Academy of PAs is the national professional society for PAs.○ It represents a profession of more than 150,000 PAs and 20,000 students across all medical and surgical specialties in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and the uniformed services.○ AAPA advocates and educates on behalf of the profession and the patients PAs serve.○ AAPA works to ensure the professional growth, personal excellence and recognition of PAs.○ Enhances the ability to improve the quality, accessibility and cost-effective patient-centered healthcare.○ Maintains a staff of 90 professionals who support the profession in advocacy, education, lobbying and policy.○ Including students, membership represents almost 50% of the profession.

- Policy is made by the House of Delegates with representation from all states and other membership organizations, this body meets annually and creates policy for the profession.
- The AAPA Board of Directors funds policy and runs the day-to-day activities of the Academy.

Table 2: About NCCPA

- The only national certifying body for physician assistants in the USA
- Founded in 1975
- Independent, not-for-profit organization. Not affiliated with any of the other PA organizations or AAPA
- Headquartered near Atlanta, Georgia
- Governed by a Board of Directors with appointees from 14 organizations, two public members, and four PA directors-at large
- NCCPA assures that certified physician assistants meet professional standards of knowledge and skills by passing initial national boards (PANCE) and recertification boards every 10 years (PANRE). PAs who pass the certification examination, maintain CME credits (and when needed to after 10 years in practice recertify) are entitled to use the title PA-C

Table 3: About PAEA

- PAEA is the only national organization representing physician assistant educational programs in the United States.
- Currently, all of the accredited programs in the country are members of the Association. PAEA provides services for faculty at its member programs, as well as to applicants, students, and other stakeholders.
- The Association was founded in 1972 as the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP)
- VISION –Health for all
- MISSION –Leadership, innovation, and excellence in PA education.

Table 4: About ARC-PA

- Protects the interests of the public and PA profession by defining the standards for PA education and evaluating PA educational programs.
- Ensures all programs maintain standards needed for a successful educational program
- Recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)
- Member of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

Table 5: Other PA Organizations

The USA has organizations that center around both specialty, geography and more.

- All 50 states and most US territories have active PA organizations
- All medical specialties have organizations that represent the profession.
- Physician Assistants for Global Health, Telemedicine, LGBTQI, National Society of Black PAs, The African Heritage PA Caucus, Religious, and many other groups are represented.

- Students have significant strength in the House of Delegates with AAPA and on the AAPA Board as well as their own Governance system with a Board, President, and a Student Assembly of Representatives.

Professional Licensure:

Upon completion of PA school, the PA program submits a release to NCCPA for the students to register for the national certifying exam through NCCPA. This exam is called the PA National Certification Examination (PANCE). All students take the PANCE which is a 300 multiple choice question test that assesses basic medical and surgical knowledge. Students are able to take the exam 3 times. The usual pass rate is in the 90% range for first time test takers (NCCPA). When the student passes the exam, the NCCPA web portals provide state licensing boards with direct, secure access to PANCE scores in order for the graduate to apply for state licensure. All states recognize the PANCE for practice of PAs in their state. After licensure, some state may require PAs to complete additional continuing medical education hours to obtain a license to practice in certain states. Every ten years, PAs are required to recertify in the same areas covered on the initial examination. The recertification exam is called the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam (PANRE).

PAs are licensed in all states and the District of Columbia and have prescribing authority in all states. PA services are reimbursed by Medicare, Medicaid, and other third-party payers. In 2022, PAs will be reimbursed directly by the government and many insurance companies for their services.

Scope of Practice:

What a PA can medically do on a day-to-day basis is determined by state legislation or if a federal employee, national rules and regulations. As in all professions, what a professional does specifically is determined by their education, competency, experience and those they work with at the practice level. Generally, PAs do the same things physicians do. The only restrictions are doing major surgery, parts of optometry (refracting) and some radiology procedures. Otherwise PAs can do most procedures if credentialed to do them. PAs in all states are allowed to prescribe medications. https://www.aapa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PA_Prescribing_Chart.pdf. PAs in all states are allowed to practice in the hospital, clinic and privately if credentialed to do so.

Credentialing of graduate PAs has three components, all of which the new PA must understand in order to obtain the right to practice:

- A national system of certification available to graduates of ARC-PA accredited programs
- A myriad of individual state credentialing procedures
- Individual credentialing and privileging processes for specific institutions and third-party payers such as with hospitals, clinics, and insurance systems

Maintaining Role:

The PA must also comply with a 10-year certification maintenance cycle comprised of five 2-year blocks where the PA must log 100 hours of CME every 2 years, At least 50 Category I (preapproved) hours and

in some states must also pass the (PANRE) in Year 9 or Year 10 of the 10-year cycle. PANRE allows 4 attempts to re-certify. Less than 1% of PAs need more than 2 attempts to pass the PANRE. Passing the PANRE is required in some states for continuation of practice and in some states it has not been a requirement. The PANCE is required in all states to practice.

PAs are encouraged to stay involved professionally by their state and national organizations. There are always legislative and their efforts that the organizations need membership help and support on. In some states, PAs need to keep up with mandatory state continuing medical education (CME) hours. Also, courses in specific areas are sometimes required by states from time to time. For instance, Florida requires courses on HIV/AIDS, medical errors and domestic violence. Other states have requirements for opioid prescribing, sexual assault and pain management. Prescribing buprenorphine requires a specific Federal course. PAs are also required to keep up with their continuing medical education hours to maintain their license to be a “certified PA” with NCCPA.

<https://www.netce.com/courselist.php#>

Job Opportunities:

Today there are 150,000 PAs practicing across all states in the US (NCCPA, state information 2020).

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physician-assistants.htm>

References:

<https://www.aapa.org>

<https://www.nccpa.net>

<https://paeaonline.org>

<https://www.pasforglobalhealth.com>

<https://www.netce.com/courselist.php#>

<http://www.arc-pa.org>