

Medicine from Down Under: Physician Assistants in Australia

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Ando Kerlen is a Physician Assistant graduate from HAN University of Applied Sciences, Nijmegen, The Netherlands with a Bachelor of Physiotherapy, University of Applied Sciences Leiden, The Netherlands Master Physician Assistant. Ando has worked in primary care in The Hague, in emergency medicine in rural South African and Johannesburg, as well as lecturing at the Clinical Associate program at Wits University in Johannesburg. He is currently the course coordinator of the only PA program in Australia at the James Cook University in Townsville, Northern Queensland.

General Information:

The need for physician assistants in Australia has been identified for decades, mainly to alleviate a maldistribution of medical staff to the detriment of rural areas.^{1,2} Since the turn of the century various organisations, including state and federally sanctioned institutions have called for PA implementation,³⁻⁵ but there has also been the strong opposition to the role however, particularly from the nursing and medical domains.⁶⁻⁹ PA pilots were conducted in Queensland and South Australia in 2009 and 2010 respectively, both concluding with positive outcomes.^{3,10} Despite precarious political positioning at the time, the University of Queensland decided to start a PA Master's degree in 2009,¹ but unfortunately closed its doors after 2 cohorts and graduating around 40 PAs.¹¹ James Cook University in Northern Queensland also started a course, in 2012, which was a 3 year Bachelor's degree but with a health care training and experience entry requirements. This program has graduated around 25 PAs to date but is currently considering a new and innovative advanced clinician model to replace the PA program. There are an estimated 20 PAs working in formal physician assistant roles. Furthermore, there are already clear indications that the COVID-19 crisis is leading to call for the formation of more PA positions because of the limits placed on international medical graduates.

Entry Criteria:

In order to qualify for entry into the program, students must have previously completed 0.5-2 years of graduate education (Cert IV) or higher in a health care related field with a minimum of two years of two years of clinical experience. No entrance examination is required.

Education:

There is one program in Australia where a Bachelor of Health Science (Physician Assistant) from the College of Medicine and Dentistry at James Cook University Townsville. The program is online and has a clinical internship. The updated educational curriculum for the proposed Master's program is not available yet at this time but is in the works. In 2019 there were 25 graduates from the program.

Financing Education:

Students enrolled in the program will have partial costs covered by the Australian government. This occurs with all Bachelor programs throughout the country. Determination of contribution under the revised program is yet to be determined. The program is eligible for partial government funding similar to all other bachelor programs in Aus. Students can also apply for government loans to cover the excess.

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

Currently only Queensland has formal regulation which guides the practice of PAs in its public health system.¹² The Queensland Health PA governance guideline is the framework for the profession. The strong opposition from both general practitioners (GP) and nurse practitioners (NP) to the profession within Australia has politically delayed development of central agencies that facilitate its progression in many ways. At this time, there is no official accrediting body or support/recognition of the profession by either the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Labor (MOL), or the Australian Health Profession Regulation Agency (AHPRA) The regulating body for education programs are:

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

<https://www.aqf.edu.au/>

GPO Box 9880

LC: C50MA7

Canberra ACT 2601

+61 8 8306 8777

aqfc@aqf.edu.au

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/>

GPO Box 1672

Melbourne VIC 3001

1300739585

enquiries@teqsa.gov.au

The Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Labour (MOL) do not work together to support the profession in any capacity .

Professional Licensure:

At the time of writing there is no professional licensure or searchable licensing database. Currently a Standard Council is setting up standards and procedure for certification in collaboration with the PA governing body in New Zealand. Formal/legal registration or licensing is not likely in the foreseeable future. This Council is not a legal entity yet. The name of this body is the Australia and New Zealand PA Standards Council (ANZPASC). There is no national certifying examination.

Maintaining License:

No current requirement for Continuing Medical Education/Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at this time though. Drafting for CPD is in process that is similar to the CPD system used by the general practitioners and rural doctors in the country which would be a 3-year cycle with 100 hours required each cycle.

Current standards in place in QLD suggest a minimum of 20h CPD per year are appropriate until formal regulations are set with a 10h / year CPD in medication related education

Provision of Medical Care/Scope of Practice:

The benefit and flaw of practicing in Australia is that there is no single scope of practice.

Queensland has a governance guideline that regulates the practice of PAs in public health. Scope is determined on an individual level aligned with the needs of the department for which a PA is employed and determined by the skill set. PAs taken on by practitioners will be obligated to develop a practice plan and have it endorsed/approved by the HHS Executive Director of Medical Services. This plan determines all allowable clinical practice activities including supervision and consultation requirements, practice exclusions/restrictions, medical imaging authority, and prescription authority for controlled substances and alternative medications from the Health (Drugs and Poisons) Regulation 1996 (HDPR).¹²

Once created, the PA has to apply for endorsement. If endorsement is granted the duration of the practice plan ends at a maximum of three years from its approval date. The supervising attending is required to review the practice plan every six months for the duration of the approval with a collaborative review occurring with the PA involved in the plan at one year. Afterwards, a new plan needs to be created and a subsequent endorsement is required. Furthermore, once approved, supervision can be direct, indirect, or remote once granted.¹²

Medications are usually supplied to patients through an 'imprest system' at the hospital, and/or through the patient's individual supply. Prescriptions for medicines which are supplied through the imprest system do not require a PA to have a Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS) Prescriber Number.7.6.3 Prescribing Exclusions Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS). A PA cannot complete or sign a prescription that is eligible for PBS reimbursement, either through the PBS access scheme, or through a private pharmacy. Therefore, a PA cannot write a prescription for drugs and/ or poisons that will not be provided directly to the patient through the imprest system or filled through the hospital pharmacy. Medical Superintendent Signed Authority Protocol There are a small number of medicines on the List of Approved Medicines that are listed within the 'Medical Superintendent Signed Authority Protocol' restriction. A PA is unable to prescribe medicines that fall within this restriction7. Therapeutic Goods Administration A PA must not prescribe, give a written or oral instruction, supply or administer

medicines that have not been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. www.tga.gov.au'Off-Label' Use A PA must not practice outside the terms of the manufacturer's product information ('off-label'), unless instructed and documented by the supervising medical practitioner and there is sufficient evidence base to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of using the drug or poison.

Job Opportunities:

There are no official public postings of PAs positions at this time. Those who are qualified PAs have to seek out practitioners who are willing to enter into practice plans. It is at this juncture that the job description and roles are developed. Currently a total of 45 PAs are actively employed throughout Australia, 20 of which are JCU trained, 20 University of Queensland trained, and five from the USA.

Although the PA profession in Australia appears to be struggling, there are initiatives that are keeping this health care model moving forward. An organisation that has been formed to guide the accreditation of PA training programs and certification of individual PAs is currently developing a standards framework. This organisation is the product of collaboration between various Australian and New Zealand stakeholders to develop this vital framework for both countries. Furthermore, the new course at James Cook University, as well as other exciting developments such as the Paramedic Practitioner model, will pave the way towards the establishment of new health profession paradigms that are so sorely needed to alleviate health care shortages in rural Australia.

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