Advice from Physician Assistants: How to Prepare PAs for Success
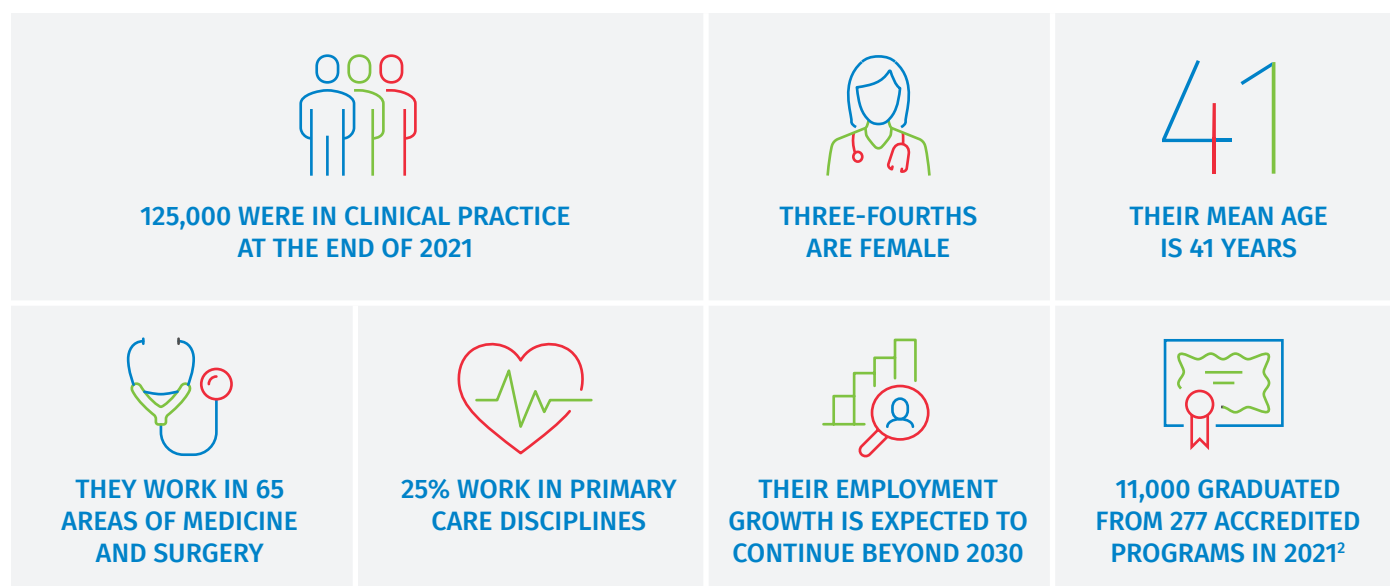
Healthcare staffing was an issue long before COVID-19. Once the pandemic hit, it was magnified exponentially – and the bottom began to fall out. Burnout is resulting in many more leaves of absence or outright resignations. Some providers have been furloughed, or lost to illness and even death. Those who thought that healthcare was their "calling" are rethinking their career choice, particularly if they seek a supported work-life balance.

Although COVID-19 has had a negative impact on most of the healthcare workforce (particularly physicians and nurses), physician assistants and associates seem to be bucking the trend. The majority of PAs surveyed during the pandemic were satisfied with their profession and upbeat about its future. As part of one of the fastest growing professions prior to COVID-19, they expressed gratitude for the availability of telehealth to remain connected to their patients. Despite physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, they were optimistic that the pandemic wouldn't negatively impact their careers.[1]

But don't expect this optimism and commitment of physician assistants and associates to hold without some significant changes, both immediate and long-term. They must be better prepared for the demands of hospitals, health systems, and medical and surgical practices. It all starts with improved PA training — from delivering bad news to patients to handling stress — so they won't be tempted to join the great resignation.

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It all begins with the students

Physician associates and assistants have been part of care teams since 1965. Here's a quick snapshot of PAs in the United States:

125,000 WERE IN CLINICAL PRACTICE AT THE END OF 2021

THREE-FOURTHS ARE FEMALE

41

THEIR MEAN AGE IS 41 YEARS

THEY WORK IN 65 AREAS OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY

25% WORK IN PRIMARY CARE DISCIPLINES

THEIR EMPLOYMENT GROWTH IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE BEYOND 2030

11,000 GRADUATED FROM 277 ACCREDITED PROGRAMS IN 2021[2]

[1] https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/practices/physician-assistants-report-covid-19-furloughs-and-burnout-but-remain-optimistic-for
[2] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34784142x

Speaking of PAs in training, there's much more that can be done to prepare them for everything they'll do as practitioners. Melissa S. Briley, MS, PA-C, says information technology education is critical for students before they ever see a patient.

"Most of them get no electronic medical record training. But once PAs are on the job, the EMR is a teaching tool, and we embed clinical decision support into it, so they need to know how to use it when they arrive. As PAs, they should be focused on how to navigate, diagnose, and treat the human body, not on how to navigate software."

A practicing family medicine PA, preceptor, and Epic Champion for University of Utah Hospitals and Clinics for 24 years, Melissa now shares her informatics expertise as an Epic Emeritus. She also noted that although she was using telehealth for a couple of years prior to the pandemic, training in best practices for virtual care is generally not offered to PA students. If they want it, they must find it and educate themselves (as she and her colleagues did).

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While all physician assistants and associates must pass certification exams to practice, the training they receive prior to certification is uneven. Andrea L. Keller, PA-C, an adult hepatology/transplant physician assistant and preceptor at MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute, says preparation depends on the student and the school.

"The last two precepting students I've had have been very well prepared. They wanted to be here, to learn, and had genuine interest. PA students have a big eye-opening experience when they start dealing with patients, and as a preceptor, my role is to help them create those relationships, so everything else comes easier. They're taught the medicine part, but no one teaches them about patient interaction."

Alessandra Zimmerman Maw, PA-C, MPAS, MPA, a physician assistant specializing in family and preventative medicine at University of Utah Health, also points to a lack of training when it comes to coding a patient visit. "It sounds boring, but it's important to learn how to code before you begin to practice. Many PAs are productivity based, paid according to how much they bill. So it's imperative that PAs and other practitioners know the right billing codes. It also benefits our patients when we code correctly."

Lack of training persists for PAs

Once a physician associate or assistant is on the job, there's little time for training — so it has to occur as part of their PA programs. In fact, Andrea says they must often become trainers themselves.

"Some medical assistants just take the initiative, room our patients, take their vitals, and try to learn. Although they're all certified, some still need help doing those basics. Once my fellow providers and I settled on a telehealth platform (the medical version of Zoom), we had to train ourselves and the medical assistants on how to get us on the platform, how to move us from patient to patient, and how to become a co-host. There was no formal sit-down, no modules to review, nothing. Literally, if you know how to do something, you teach the next person."

While PAs must keep up their licensure, Melissa says it's also important for them to seek out education resources to expand their knowledge and capabilities. PA program faculty should note that telehealth training, or lack thereof, is one area Melissa cited.

"We got zero formal training on virtual healthcare in the past two years. I learned to use the technology, then wrote the best practices and shared them with the organization. You have to consider everything, from how the background looks to the patient's privacy."

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Get PAs ready for the challenges ahead

Hospitals, health systems, and medical and surgical practices want to recruit highly trained and skilled physician assistants, then retain them for the long term. Here's what you can do to better prepare PAs for the workforce:

1 Equip them with digital solutions offering PA-specific foundational content and clinical skills training

2 Thoroughly develop their capabilities as both in-person and virtual practitioners

3 Add technology training to the curriculum

4 Give them the tools to manage charting and email themselves, or supervise RNs or MAs to share those responsibilities

5 Create an environment of information sharing and collaboration

6 Include resources geared specifically towards PA board exam preparation

7 Teach them what to ask patients, how to ask, and what to do with their responses

8 Incorporate or enhance training for evolving patient demographics such as LGBTQ+, and growing practices such as trauma-informed care

9 Encourage them to be lifelong learners

Give your PA students the tools to be great practitioners. It will give them more career satisfaction, their employers a competitive advantage — and their patients better outcomes.

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