What is a PA (Physician Assistant)?

A PA is a nationally certified and state-licensed medical professional.

PAs practice medicine on healthcare teams with physicians and other providers.

They practice and prescribe medication in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the majority of the U.S. territories and the uniformed services.

What Can PAs Do?

What a PA does varies with training, experience, state law, and the scope of the supervising physician's practice. In general, a PA will see many of the same types of patients as the physician. Referral to or consultation with the physician is done for unusual or hard to manage cases. All fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Guam have enacted laws that authorize PA to prescribe in the context of the physician-PA practice arrangement.

PAs provide a broad range of diagnostic and therapeutic services. They practice in the primary care specialties of family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology. PAs practice in many medical or surgical subspecialties including, but not limited to oncology, endocrinology, rheumatology, plastic and reconstructive surgery, dermatology, interventional radiology and radiotherapy.

As part of their comprehensive responsibilities, PAs conduct interviews and physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel on preventive health care, assist in surgery. A PA's practice may also include higher education and clinical research.

Once certified by the NCCPA, the new graduate must be licensed to practice medicine with supervision by an appropriate state medical board. To maintain national certification, each PA must log 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and sit for a recertification every ten years.

PAs are clinicians who are licensed throughout the United States to practice medicine in association with physicians. They perform many of the tasks previously done solely by their physician partners, including examination, diagnosis, and carrying out investigations, as well as treatment and prescribing. All physician assistants must be associated with a physician and must practice in an interdependent role, described as "negotiated performance autonomy."

"PAs are not independent practitioners but practice-focused autonomous professionals delivering care in partnership with physicians, in a role described as "negotiated performance autonomy." This relationship allows them to staff satellite clinic offices, provide on-call services in the practice, and deliver care in rural areas, as in most states the physician partner need not be physically present for the physician assistant to practice. They may work as house staff in large academic teaching centers, replacing physicians whose posts are no longer funded, and they also

serve as commissioned officers in all branches of the American armed forces. They have demonstrated social responsiveness by focusing on primary care practice, thus fulfilling the original intent of the profession's founders to improve access to health care for populations in rural, inner city, and other medically underserved areas." (Mittman, DE, Fenn, WH, Cawley, JF, 2012)

"Numerous studies have shown that the quality of care given by PAs is at the level of that given by physicians in comparable situations, with high levels of patient satisfaction. Actuarial data do not show any increased liability as a result of using physician assistants. A growing body of research and extensive clinical experience shows that they are accepted by both patients and doctors and that their performance in terms of quality of care, expanded access, and cost effectiveness is satisfactory." (Mittman, DE, Fenn, WH, Cawley, JF, 2012) http://www.paworld.net/

How are PAs Educated and Trained?

The PA educational program is modeled on the medical school curriculum, a combination of classroom and clinical instruction. The PA course of study is rigorous and intense. The average length of a PA education program is 27 months.

Admission to any PA school is highly competitive. Applicants to the LSUHSC-NO PA program must complete college courses in basic science and behavioral science as prerequisites to PA school, analogous to premedical studies required of medical students. The majority of PA programs have the following prerequisites: chemistry, physiology, anatomy, microbiology, and biology. Additionally, most PA programs require or prefer that applicants have prior healthcare experience.

PA education includes instruction in core sciences: anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pharmacology, physical diagnosis, pathophysiology, microbiology, clinical laboratory science, behavioral science, and medical ethics.

PAs also complete more than 2,000 hours of clinical rotations, with an emphasis on primary care in ambulatory clinics, physician offices, and acute or long-term care facilities. Rotations include family medicine, internal medicine, Women’s Health, pediatrics, general surgery, emergency medicine, and psychiatry.

Practicing PAs participate in lifelong learning. In order to maintain national certification, a PA must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years.