

Chapter 36

THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROFESSION

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Introduction

The physician assistant (PA) profession is regulated and supported by four independent organizations: the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA), the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), and the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA). The goal of this chapter is to educate prospective PAs, PA students, and current PAs about these organizations and to show how they affect the profession and PAs as individuals. These four organizations are independent, not-for-profit corporations, each fulfilling a key role in representing and advocating for the profession, accrediting the educating institutions, certifying individual PAs, and representing PA programs (Figure 36-1).

The AAPA is a professional association that focuses on federal- and state-level advocacy and provides ongoing professional development for PAs.¹ The ARC-PA is the accrediting organization for the educational programs that produce PAs.^{2,3} The NCCPA is the testing and certifying organization that certifies and recertifies individual PAs and determines the standards for maintenance of certification.⁴ Lastly, the PAEA supports PA educational programs by collecting, publishing, and disseminating information to its member programs and creating development tools for program faculty and staff.⁵ In concert, all four independent organizations work to support the PA profession in a continuous endeavor to provide the structure to ensure PAs provide quality healthcare.

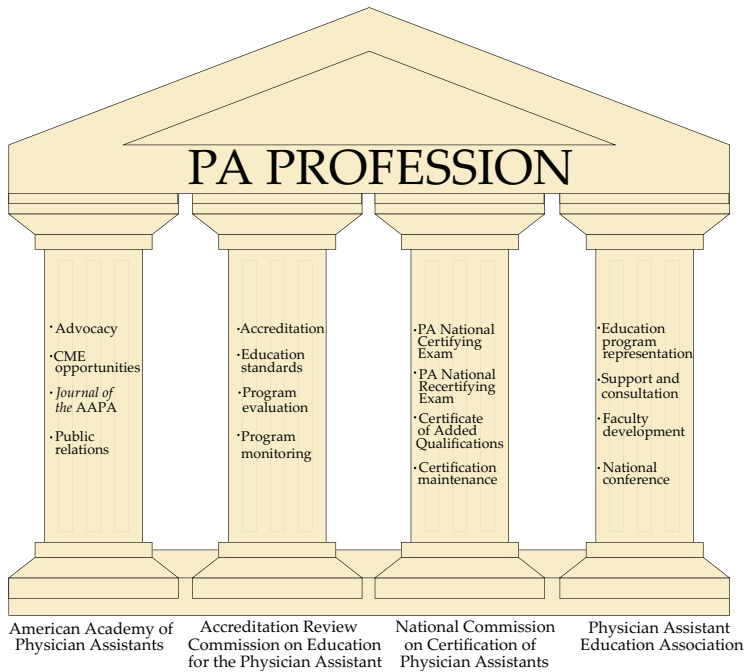


Figure 36-1. The “Four Pillars” of the physician assistant profession.

American Academy of Physician Assistants

The AAPA is the national professional society for PAs, representing all PAs across the United States. As an organization, “AAPA advocates and educates” the public “on behalf of the profession.”⁶ The AAPA also “works to ensure professional development, personal excellence, and recognition of PAs.”⁶ The AAPA enhances PAs’ ability to “improve the quality, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness of patient-centered health care.”^{7(p3)} As leaders in the profession, the AAPA “empowers members to advance their careers and enhance patient health.”^{8(p7)}

History

The American Association of Physician Assistants, AAPA’s previous name, had its inaugural meeting in North Carolina in 1968, sponsored

by the initial Duke University PA graduates.¹ These graduates were returning Vietnam veterans with real-world knowledge and skills resulting from combat medical experience. Beginning in 1973, the organization moved several times, from Washington, DC, to Arlington, Virginia, in the late 1970s, followed by another relocation, to Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, in the late 1980s. In 2001 AAPA relocated to the Carlyle area of Alexandria.¹

Key Contributions

- PA advocacy at the state and national levels.
- Provision of continuing medical educational opportunities.
- Information repository for the profession via the *Journal of the American Academy of Physician Assistants*, practice resources, professional news, and research.
- Constituent organization support.
- Public relations.⁹

Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant

The ARC-PA provides accreditation of PA programs “by defining the standards for PA education and evaluating PA educational programs.”² Throughout the year, ARC-PA works across the United States evaluating PA programs through site visits and program portals to ensure compliance with its standards.² By accomplishing this mission, the ARC-PA “protects the interests of the public, current and prospective PA students, and the PA profession.”²

History

In May 1971, the American Medical Association (AMA) developed “the Essentials of an Accredited Educational Program for the Assistant to the Primary Care Physician,” later referred to as “the Essentials.”¹⁰ Seven medical academies comprised the Subcommittee of the Council on Medical Education’s Advisory Committee on Education for Allied Health Professions and Service.¹⁰ The subcommittee accepted the Essentials, allowing for educational programs that meet the accreditation requirements to become approved PA educational programs.¹⁰

In 1972, the Joint Review Committee for Educational Programs for the Assistant to Primary Care Physician (JRC-PA) had a year of three firsts.¹⁰ JRC-PA held its first meeting; elected its first chair, Dr Malcolm L Peterson; and made its first accreditation recommendations to the AMA.⁷ In 1988, JRC-PA took on a new name, “Accreditation Review Committee on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA).”¹⁰

In 1991, AAPA assumed responsibility as the sponsoring organization for ARC-PA.¹⁰ Ten years later, on January 1, 2001, ARC-PA became a “freestanding accrediting agency for the PA profession.”¹⁰ On October 1, 2004, the ARC-PA moved its current operations to Duluth, Georgia.¹⁰

After a maximum of 7 years, accreditation for PA programs must be renewed.¹¹ ARC-PA monitors programs through annual reports to ARC-PA and site accreditation visits based upon the length of the program’s accreditation status.¹¹ ARC-PA accreditation regulates the profession via a published manual and its commissioners (who serve as program reviewers and inspectors).⁹ ARC-PA accreditation focuses on three main areas of academia: administration, curriculum and instruction, and evaluation.¹²

Key Contributions

- Establish educational standards utilizing broad-based input.
- Define and administer the process for comprehensive review of applicant programs.
- Define and administer the process for accreditation decision-making.
- Determine whether PA educational programs are in compliance with the established standards.
- Work collaboratively with collaborating organizations.
- Define and administer a process for appeal of accreditation decisions.³

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants

The mission of the NCCPA is “to provide certificate programs that reflect standards for clinical knowledge, clinical reasoning, and other skills and professional behaviors required upon entry into practice and throughout the careers of physician assistants.”⁴ As the only national

certification body for the PA profession, the NCCPA is devoted to serving the public and PAs to support the structure of affordable, high-quality healthcare.^{4,13}

History

In 1974, the National Board of Medical Examiners and the AMA assembled to consider “establishing an independent certifying authority for the PA profession.”¹⁴ “Fourteen national organizations [representing] major medical specialty societies, state licensing authorities, education associations, government agencies, and the existing PA organizations” participated in establishing the NCCPA.⁴

Governance of the NCCPA is by a board of directors that currently includes ten PAs, seven physicians, and two members of the public.¹⁴ The board will be reduced in size through tenure attrition in 2016 to nine PAs, five physicians, and two members of the public.¹⁴ “All US states, the District of Columbia, and the US territories have decided to rely on NCCPA certification criteria for initial licensure or regulation of PAs.”¹⁴ Since NCCPA’s inception, more than 102,000 PAs have been certified.⁴

Key Contributions

- Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE).
- Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam (PANRE).
- Certificate of Added Qualifications (CAQ).
- Certification maintenance, requiring continuing medical education (CME).¹³

Physician Assistant Education Association

As AAPA represents the profession, the PAEA provides similar representation to PA educational programs, focusing on the education process of the profession.⁵ As the “only national organization in the United States representing PA educational programs,”¹⁵ PAEA assists in organizing resources for “individuals and organizations from various professional sectors interested in the educational aspects of the PA profession.”¹⁵ The PAEA’s primary responsibility is to gather the information that supports faculty within the programs, and to publish data ensuring faculty have the information they need to provide the

best possible education to PA students.⁵ As the healthcare industry continues to change, PAEA works to ensure that PA programs can meet emerging needs.⁵

History

In 1972, PA program administrators realized there were important issues concerning “accreditation, certification, continuing educational requirements and role delineation”¹⁵ from the educational perspective that required a focused effort to address. The Association of Physician Assistant Programs, now PAEA, took up this effort with the “overall goal of improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare through the selection, education, and deployment of PAs.”¹⁵

Prior to 2004, the association was housed with AAPA and under its management.¹⁵ Beginning in 2004, it decided to become an entirely independent organization separate from AAPA. In October 2005, the association voted to change its name to PAEA.¹⁵ In May 2006, it moved to an independent location in Alexandria, Virginia,¹⁵ and in 2015, PAEA relocated to the Association of American Medical Colleges building in Washington, DC.¹⁵ PAEA’s membership continues to grow, now including “over 196 accredited US PA programs.”^{15,16}

Key Contributions

Program support resources include:

- end-of-rotation exams and
- the Physician Assistant Clinical Knowledge Rating and Assessment Tool (PACKRAT).

Faculty development resources include:

- the *Journal of Physician Assistant Education*;
- PAEA Professional Service, a consultation service for program development and accreditation;
- the PAEA National Educational Conference;
- *A Comprehensive Review for the Certification and Recertification Examinations for Physician Assistants*;¹⁷
- the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA), a web-based application system that allows students to apply

to multiple participating PA educational programs with a single application; and

- advocacy for PA education.¹⁸

The Four Pillars Within the Military Physician Assistant Career Lifecycle

An examination of these four key organizations provides a lens through which military PAs can track their career from initiation into the profession as a student through decades of practice and ultimate retirement. The ARC-PA maintains the educational requirements for the profession. All PA programs, including the Interservice Physician Assistant Program (IPAP), are regulated by the ARC-PA. ARC-PA commissioners monitor the IPAP yearly through regular reporting via an electronic portal, and ARC-PA site visitors conduct a physical site inspection of the IPAP at most every 10 years.^{2,11} During these inspections, site visitors evaluate the IPAP's administration, curriculum, instruction, and evaluation processes, and conduct faculty and student interviews. ARC-PA accreditation is a requirement that the IPAP must maintain for students to become eligible for initial certification via successful completion of the PANCE.¹⁹

The PAEA's role in the PA profession is integral to the development of educational processes. The PAEA assists PA programs with the educational training of program directors, academic coordinators, and clinical coordinators, as well as the professional development of all faculty. The PAEA produces the PACKRAT to evaluate students at the end of their didactic phase and develops end-of-rotation exams for the purpose of evaluating clinical rotation knowledge.¹⁸

The ARC-PA and PAEA have a critical impact on the development and sustainment of PA programs. Faculty members become intimate with the ARC-PA standards as they guide students through their academic pursuits, and the PAEA contributions assist the faculty as they look for better ways to educate their students. As students near graduation, NCCPA and AAPA begin to play a bigger role in their future careers as PAs.

PA programs register students with the NCCPA, allowing them access to create accounts and schedule testing for the PANCE. The PANCE is the national certification examination that all PAs must pass upon completion of their formal educational training to practice

in the military healthcare system.²⁰ After passing the PANCE, students become certified and are authorized to use the title “PA-C” (Physician Assistant-Certified).¹⁸ This certification enables them to access the NCCPA portal (known as a PA’s “dashboard”) to log their CME credits. One hundred CME credits must be completed every 2 years and be recorded and maintained within the NCCPA’s portal. PAs also use the portal to keep records of their certification and schedule PANRE certification maintenance exams.

The AAPA assists PAs in the CME process by approving, centralizing, and developing CME activities. The AAPA defines and approves category 1 CME, including activities designated as self-assessment (SA) and performance (PI) CMEs.⁹ The AAPA also works as the profession’s advocate by developing leadership, promoting research, and lobbying at the national and state levels.⁹ For military PAs, AAPA’s non-CME contributions usually become more evident with the transition to civilian life and search for civilian employment.

The ARC-PA, PAEA, and NCCPA all have roles to play as former active duty PAs transition into myriad roles as civilian professionals. AAPA resources are invaluable during searches for employment and research into contract negotiations and state rules and regulations. PAs who wish to seek an educational component to their practice will find PAEA a doorway to transition into scholarly endeavors. Furthermore, all PAs will have a career-long relationship with NCCPA because continued certification maintenance is a requirement for employment with the federal government and half of the states.⁴ Regardless of career choices, the four pillars of the PA profession continue to support PAs throughout their professional careers.

Conclusion

The PA profession began as a revolutionary idea and has become a staple of the medical field. The year 2020 marks 55 years of the modern PA profession, which started with one program at Duke University in 1965 and progressed to its current status of “196 ARC-PA–accredited PA programs.”^{6,16} Advancing from certificate programs to the present Master’s Degree in Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) as the entry-level and terminal degree, the PA profession continues to evolve. Formerly overseen by physician boards, the PA profession is now self-regulated and supported by the four independent pillars.

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