

Chapter 60

ROLE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT (TACTICAL MEDICAL OFFICER)

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“White House Physician Assistants are the tip of the spear, leading White House Medical Unit process improvement initiatives throughout the operations, clinical, and executive medicine mission.”

—*White House Medical Unit Director, State of the Unit, 2020*

Introduction

The joint service White House Medical Unit (WHMU) physician assistant (PA) has served as the senior medical planner and tactical medical officer (TMO) for the president, vice president, first family, and second family of the United States for the past 42 years. The first PAs from the Army, Navy, and Air Force joined the ranks of the WHMU in 1978.¹ At the position’s inception, the White House PA performed hospital and site assessments to assist the physician to the president with medical planning.

Over the past 4 decades, trailblazers in the joint service WHMU PA position have expanded the initial role to include chief operations officer, deputy chief operations officer, officer in charge of five clinics, WHMU training officer, tactical medical officer, and PA to the physician to the president. Major Saibatu Mansaray-Knight was the first female Army PA to be assigned to WHMU.² She ultimately became the first medical officer to be selected as the Army military aide to the vice president of the United States.² Lieutenant Colonel James Jones was the first PA to serve as the deputy director of the WHMU and PA to the physician to the president. In 2017, Lieutenant Colonel Jones was awarded the Director’s Lifesaving Citation for his efforts in treating a Secret Service agent while on mission in Peru.^{3,4}

Roles and Responsibilities

PAs assist the White House physicians in providing comprehensive health care to the president, vice president, and their families. They also provide on-site medical response and urgent care for the president and vice president. White House PAs develop, coordinate, and direct comprehensive multiagency emergency plans for tactical, strategic, traumatic, and medical contingency scenarios worldwide. They independently conduct on-site and remote assessments of medical capabilities at White House travel destinations worldwide. The PAs also provide acute care to military personnel assigned to the White House and occupational health services to members of the White House staff and Secret Service.

“Tactical medical officer” is the official title of PAs assigned to the WHMU. As a TMO, White House PAs ensure the continuity of the Office of the President by developing and implementing protective medicine plans and procedures, managing executive health care, gathering global medical intelligence, performing contingency medical planning, and supporting travel medicine. Protective medicine procedures and travel medicine support include immunizations for endemic diseases, malaria prophylaxis, and guidance on protecting travelers from a variety of food-, water-, and insect-borne disease. White House PAs gather medical intelligence through on-site surveys of medical facilities and by conducting extensive research through a variety of approved online medical databases.

As part of contingency medical planning, White House PAs evaluate prehospital evacuation platforms, develop plans for all potential natural and manmade medical threats, and implement mitigation strategies to prevent injury or disease. White House PAs work with the Secret Service, other White House Military Office (WHMO) elements, other components of the Department of Defense (DOD) and local, state, federal, and international governments to plan and prepare for lifesaving medical interdiction involving serious injury or illness to the president or vice president. PAs also serve as the solo health care provider for the vice president and first lady of the United States.

Supervision

White House PAs are supervised by White House physicians, who are board-certified in emergency and family medicine. White House PAs collaborate directly with the physician to the president and are credentialed through Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

Unit Structure

White House PAs belong to the WHMU, a vital branch of the WHMO. The WHMO provides direct military support to the president and vice president. The WHMO also oversees functions such as presidential food services, transportation, world-wide communications, medical support, emergency medical services, and hospitality services. WHMO supporting units include the White House Communications Agency, Presidential Airlift Group, Naval Support Activity Thurmont, Marine Helicopter Squadron One, Presidential Food Service, and the White House Transportation Agency.⁵

WHMU is a joint service unit comprised of physicians, PAs, nurses, psychologists, administrators, logisticians and medics/corpsmen, from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard. Together, these personnel are responsible for the health care of the president, vice president, and their families. The unit also provides acute and emergency care services to over 3,000 military members assigned to presidential support, 6,000 members of the Executive Office of the President, the Secret Service, and the 1.5 million visitors to the White House annually. Together, WHMO and WHMU provide essential services to the president and help maintain the continuity of the presidency (Figure 60-1).

Leadership Opportunities

The leadership opportunities available to WHMU PAs include the following:

- **Chief of operations.** Works directly with presidential staff to develop the medical plan for travel. Responsible for primary hospital selection and medical package development; serves as the senior liaison for any issues that arise related to mission support.



Figure 60-1. White House Medical Unit with President Barack Obama in the State Dining Room, January 17, 2017. Photograph courtesy of the White House.

- **Deputy chief of operations.** Responsible for the development of medical packages, medical divert information, and domestic and foreign travel requirements.
- **Senior PA.** Manages the PAs sponsorship program. Works with the PA training officer to make sure all TMOs are mission ready and deployable at all times.
- **Clinic officer in charge.** Manages physicians, PAs, nurses, and medics assigned to the clinic. Oversees medical care provided to those who support president and vice president.
- **PA training officer.** Manages the training for all PAs. Coordinates directly with DOD training units and civilian agencies for all initial and sustainment training for TMOs.

Required Skills and Desired Attributes

The required skills and desired attributes for this positions are:

- 6 years of active duty service, including a post-training utilization tour of at least 3 years as a PA, and a demonstrated record of sustained clinical excellence;
- proven track record of exemplary interpersonal skills, maturity, integrity, and character;
- graduate of an accredited PA program;
- certification from the National Commission of Certification of Physician Assistants;
- certification in Advanced Life Support;
- experience in Advanced Life Support principles;
- operational experience (preferred);
- rank of captain or junior major;
- graduate of the Captains Career Course (required) and Intermediate Level Education (preferred);
- outstanding written and oral communication skills; and
- must meet Army weight and physical fitness standards and be a nonsmoker.

Training

The training path to become a fully qualified TMO may take up to a year and is conducted during real world operations. A TMO will become fully qualified to develop contingency medical plans for the president and vice president after completing a contingency medical officer fellowship at the WHMU. The fellowship has objective training measures and guidelines on the number of missions needed for completion.

In addition to maintaining the required medical readiness training, PAs must complete the following additional training during the first year of assignment: Tactical Combat Medical Care Course, Management of Chemical and Biological Casualties Course, WHMO course, Radiation Emergency Assistance Center/Training Site course, Advanced Trauma Life Support, Advanced Cardiac Life Support, Basic Life Support, and Pediatric Advanced Life Support.⁶ Other training is provided, as required, based on the PA's individual level of experience.

Key Factors

This position is typically 3 years in length. WHMU submits a formal request for candidates from the Office of the Secretary of Defense 15

months prior to the projected vacancy. It is DOD policy under Directive 5210.55⁷ that only the most suitable and qualified individuals shall be selected for and retained in presidential support duties to ensure optimum presidential security and support. All candidates must be able to obtain a top secret and Yankee White clearance for presidential support duties in accordance with DOD Directive 5210.55,⁷ and they must be selected through a competitive interview process.

Successful candidates will represent military medicine to the nation's senior leaders. Being a White House PA is a demanding yet rewarding position. The professional development and communication skills PAs develop at the White House are invaluable to the success of the WHMU mission.

Lessons Learned and Tips for Success

Before applying, those with a spouse or family must fully consider the impact of extensive short-notice travel requirements. Typically, temporary duty trip durations are 3 to 10 days, and occur four to six times per month; occasionally trips may last up to 14 days. PAs are occasionally sent from one mission to the next without the chance to return home. Travel notifications can be as short as 60 minutes during times of increased operational tempo. A robust family care plan is absolutely essential for a PA's success.

WHMU is unlike any military billet most PAs have ever held before. PAs operate in a civilian business environment and must be flexible and maintain discrete professionalism at all times. PAs will engage with patients of all ages and social stature. The daily uniform is business attire; service dress is worn occasionally. The operational camouflage pattern uniform is not worn when assigned to WHMU.

Conclusion

If selected to serve in this distinguished position, all candidates should be prepared to embark on a 12-month intensive training process. Although the overall framework is established, each PA's training path is unique, allowing them to focus on what interests them the most. The WHMU is seeking candidates who are flexible, innovative, and willing to learn. The most successful PAs at the WHMU are those who can accomplish the mission in any environment.

References

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