

Chapter 3

THE ROLE OF THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT AS THE SPECIALIST AND VETERINARY CORPS EDUCATION BRANCH CHIEF

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Introduction

The education branch chief (EBC) for the Specialist (SP) and Veterinary Corps (VC) is an SP Corps immaterial officer (65X) who is assigned to the Professional Education and Training Department (PETD), US Army Medical Center of Excellence (MEDCoE), Joint Base San Antonio–Fort Sam Houston, Texas. This officer is essential to synchronizing key strategic education and training initiatives for the SP and VC. The EBC also serves as the co-chair of the SP Corps education committee. The position is essential for execution of the long-term health education and training (LTHET) programs and the post-professional short course program (PPSCP). The EBC facilitates the administrative and budgetary requirements of these programs in collaboration with the organization's resource management office and corps leadership.

Organizational Functions

PETD serves multiple roles that influence Army Medical Department (AMEDD) officers on a daily basis. The functions of the department include the following:

- Serves as the proponent and principle advisor for Army Regulation 351-3, *Professional Education and Training Programs of the Army Medical Department*; LTHET; PPSCP; and professional certification (or licensure) maintenance and supporting policies.¹

- Coordinates AMEDD, MEDCoE, Defense Health Agency, and Department of Defense professional education initiatives with corps leadership, including the graduate education manager, area of concentration (AOC) consultants to the surgeon general, corps-specific branch proponent officers (CSBPO), and corps chiefs.
- Facilitates SP and VC corps programs—LTHET, training with industry (TWI), and PPSCP.
- Validates military training agreements and education service agreements with institutions that support LTHET and PPSCPs.

Unit Structure

The EBC is rated by the department director and senior-rated by the assistant commandant. The department was historically task-organized under the Directorate of Training and Academic Affairs. However, since the 2019 restructuring and the transition to the MEDCoE, the department is under the assistant commandant's office. The department works closely with the Office of the Surgeon General (OTSG), Army Medicine Proponency Office, AMEDD Personnel Proponent Directorate, Capability Development Integration Directorate, MEDCoE Resource Management, Department of Graduate Education (MEDCoE Graduate School), and Human Resources Command to perform its routine functions.

Program Management

Program Development and Implementation

Each program must undergo an annual multidepartment analysis. For the SP Corps, the process starts with providing a proof of concept to the education committee for review. The education committee serves as the executive body responsible for providing strategic oversight to education and training initiatives. The proof of concept must evaluate the components of doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy as follows:

- identify capability gap or requirement;
- identify training platforms capable of providing required education;
- evaluate program compliance in accordance with policies and doctrine;

- evaluate AOC and trainee, transient, holdee, and student inventory;
- identify and approve utilization tours (designated as “97” on the modified table of organization and equipment or the table of distribution and allowances);
- execute a costs and business case analysis; and
- evaluate selection processes and prerequisites for the program (eg, grade point requirements, civilian education level, military education level, and Graduate Record Examination scores).

Once reviewed, the education committee provides its recommendation to the corps chief. If approved, the packet is sent to PETD for inclusion on the board. Once a program is validated, it may be included in future boards without resubmission through the education committee. The VC has a similar process and staffs the product through executive leaders, but without a specific committee to fulfill the function.

Types of Long-Term Health Education and Training Programs

The types of programs determine the funding sources and governing policies and regulations. Three programs cover all training opportunities.

School of Choice Programs. These degree-granting programs or professional residencies matriculate at a civilian institution. PETD manages the funding requirements of these programs in conjunction with Central Training Branch. Each student has historically been authorized a \$1,000 book stipend annually, and a \$200 to \$500 stipend with completion of a program requiring a thesis or dissertation. Temporary duty costs, candidacy fees, and board certification fees are reimbursed only if they are program and corps requirements. Board certification fees are typically reimbursed only if certification is required for the AOC designation and occurs within the contracted LTHET period. Examples include Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Masters in Public Health (MPH), and Masters in Health Administration (MHA).

Federal Programs. A Department of Defense institution sponsors these degree-granting, professional residencies or fellowships. Typically, each program’s host organization supports funding requirements in

accordance with MEDCoE agreements generated by the office of Assistant Chief of Staff for Resource Management. Examples include the following:

- Laboratory Animal Medicine Programs
- Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
- US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases
- Walter Reed Army Institute of Research
- DOD Veterinary Pathology Residency (DODVPR), Joint Pathology Center
- US Army–Baylor/MEDCoE Graduate School Programs
- Doctor of Science in Occupational Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Physical Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Physician Assistant Studies
- Fellowships
- Test and Evaluation Fellowship, AMEDD Board
- Point-of-Care Ultrasound Fellowship (Brooke Army Medical Center and Madigan Army Medical Center)

Training With Industry. Civilian internships, residencies, or fellowships sponsored and managed by the Department of the Army are separate from the LTHET offerings. However, they are included as part of the AMEDD LTHET validation board to fulfill Army requirements. The Department of the Army has quotas for these programs, and the corps must provide an order-of-merit list if they are requesting multiple training-with-industry positions. The sponsoring civilian organization typically funds program requirements. Offerings include:

- American Academy of Physician Assistants
- National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants
- National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians

Validation Process

After the SP and VC populate their program information into the annual program and position requirements worksheet (PPRW), PETD reviews the products to ensure compliance with governing policies and regulations. The Army Medicine Proponency Office then holds an electronic voting board using the automated PPRW to staff the annual

LTHET offerings for the AMEDD. Historically, the corps chief delegates the duty of voting and corps representation on the electronic board to the CSBPO. PETD summarizes the results and forwards them to the surgeon general through the MEDCoE commander for final approval. The surgeon general retains Title 10 authority over education and training of AMEDD officers under the reorganization.

Physician Assistant Planning Cycle

It is imperative that all PAs understand the validation process for LTHET and PPSCP. The process for LTHET programs occurs approximately 2 years prior to execution, whereas the PPSCP process occurs approximately 1 year prior to execution. With this in mind, PAs should coordinate emerging requirements and new courses approximately 3 years in advance to provide ample time for the required staffing and implementation. In preparation for the annual board, the graduate education manager, AOC consultant, CSBPO, and EBC work together to populate the key staff products. This primarily involves creating the PPRW for LTHET and TWI offerings, along with submitting the course administrative data sheets for the PPSCPs.

LTHET and TWI Planning Cycles

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| • October–November | LTHET military personnel (MILPER) message releases |
| • November–January | Applications submitted to, and staffed by, Human Resources Command |
| • January–February | Application waiver review and disposition |
| • February–March | PPRW input, TWI memo, and course administration datasheet generation |
| • April | LTHET / TWI / PPSCP validation board and selection panel |
| • June–July | LTHET results released |
| • August–September | Application and MILPER message revision |

Skills and Attributes

The PETD position requires an experienced officer with a background in academia who collaborates effectively with multiple entities and senior AMEDD leaders. This officer advises and ensures that education and training requirements are incorporated into life-cycle management and integrated into all changes to doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy decisions affecting corps officers.

At PETD, a major or lieutenant colonel with the following experience historically serves as the EBC:

- knowledge of military and deployed medicine readiness requirements;
- experience in graduate professional education across multiple professions;
- prior academic leadership and program budget management;
- prior experience as a project officer for a PPSCP, functional course, or continuing education unit or continuing medical education activity;
- knowledge of national professional certification and license maintenance requirements for multiple disciplines;
- knowledge of personnel database systems such as the Force Management System website, Medical Operational Data System, and Total Officer Personnel Management Information System;
- effective verbal and written communication skills, including the ability to produce cogent staff materials designed for diverse audiences; and
- completion of Intermediate Level Education (recommended).

Duties and Responsibilities

On a daily basis, the EBC has many routine requirements, including the following:

- coordinating student tuition and associated program costs with Central Training Branch,
- validating and processing execution costs for PPSCPs,
- participating in briefing corps leadership on education and training activities, and

- analyzing AMEDD initiatives to provide input or recommendations to corps office staffing functions.

Routinely, the EBC is engaged in the following activities:

- speaking at junior officer mentorship programs (Basic Officer Leader Course, Captains Career Course, professional conferences, and graduate school programs),
- conducting SP Corps education committee (monthly),
- briefing the SP corps chief update (quarterly) and VC leadership upon request,
- submitting articles to the *SP Corps Connection* newsletter (quarterly),
- briefing the SP Corps Strategic Advisory Board (biannually) on education and training initiatives,
- co-authoring the SP corps handbook (annually),
- facilitating tuition waiver requirements (January–March),
- conducting LTHET student in-briefs (April–May),
- facilitating program validation and PPRW submission (April–May), and
- facilitating MILPER and LTHET application updates (August–September).

Lessons Learned

The EBC position may be challenging for individuals without a diverse background in academics, resource management, or the US Department of Education infrastructure. Each of the managed programs and courses have specific friction points that the EBC must be aware of to mitigate potential issues. This is complicated by managing two separate corps, because the officer requires familiarization with ten different AOCs and their associated education offerings and roles within the AMEDD. Early communication and research with AOC consultants and the CSBPO is essential to success. Familiarization with commonly used regulatory guidance is a vital step to professional success as the EBC.

Conclusion

The EBC provides a broadening opportunity for a field-grade officer to serve in a job that influences multiple disciplines of the AMEDD. The

individual holding the position will gain key knowledge of AMEDD planning processes and will work collaboratively with multiple organizations and agencies throughout the Department of Defense. PAs are well suited for this position with their diverse understanding of multidisciplinary care in the deployed environment and military medical treatment facilities. The position provides officers with the potential to affect long-term AMEDD initiatives and shape multiple professions.

As of 2020, and as part of the MEDCoE reorganization, this authorization will be repurposed to the Directorate of Training and Doctrine. In this new role, the officer will be acting as the subject matter expert for the SP Corps and be working to develop education and training platforms for the MEDCoE across operational, institutional, and self-development (OISD) domains.

Reference

1. US Department of the Army. *Professional Education and Training Programs of the Army Medical Department*. DA; 2007. Army Regulation 351-3. Accessed July 29, 2020. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/AR%20351-3.pdf

Additional Sources

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