

# PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

## OVERVIEW

*Physician assistants (PAs)* provide medical care that ranges from basic primary health care to specialty and surgical procedures. They work under the supervision of physicians. Physician assistants work in almost all medical and surgical specialties and in every medical setting. Nearly 25 percent of PAs specialize in family/general medicine, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA). Other popular practice areas include surgical subspecialties (22.4 percent) and internal medicine subspecialties (10.8 percent). Associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree programs in physician assisting are available; 80 percent of accredited programs offer the option of a master's degree. According to the AAPA, there are more than 74,450 practicing physician assistants in the United States. Employment for physician assistants is expected to grow much faster than the average for all careers through 2018.

### FAST FACTS

#### High School Subjects

Biology  
Health

#### Personal Skills

Communication  
Critical thinking  
Helping  
Judgment and decision making

#### Minimum Education Level

Associate's degree

#### Salary Range

\$55,000 to \$93,000 to  
\$115,000+

#### Employment Outlook

Much faster than the average

#### O\*NET-SOC

29-1071.00

#### GOE

14.02.01

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#### NOC

3123

## THE JOB

The emergency room is filled to capacity, with many more patients waiting to be triaged. A boy with a possible broken arm, an elderly woman with a bad case of the flu, and a young woman having an asthma attack are just a few of the cases that the emergency room staff is facing. With the help of a physician assistant, patients with less-critical cases are seen, diagnosed, treated, and, hopefully, sent home. Physician assistants play an important role in these situations. They help speed the flow of patients through the emergency department. But PAs don't just work in emergency rooms. Wherever there are patients in need of health services, there are physician assistants to provide key support to physicians.

PAs are trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive health care services, working under the supervision of physicians. When taking a new case, they take into account the patient's medical history—what medicines the patient is currently taking, his or her family medical history, and all presenting symptoms and complaints. They give the patient a complete examination and, depending on the patient's symptoms, order blood work or other laboratory tests such as x-rays, MRIs, or CT scans. With such information, PAs are able to make a diagnosis and begin to treat the patient's condition. PAs prescribe the proper medication or refer the patient to a physician for further evaluation. PAs can prescribe medications in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In the majority of employment settings, prescriptions and laboratory test requests written by the PA must be evaluated and approved by the attending medical physician. PAs working in the inner city or in a rural setting may not be constantly supervised by a physician. They sometimes may be the sole care provider in the clinic. Such settings may have physicians present only some days of the week or for only a few hours a day. In these cases, the PA is responsible for seeing patients and conferring with medical physicians as needed or as dictated by state law.

PAs also practice preventive health care services by counseling patients about health care issues. They may caution patients on potential side effects or adverse reactions from certain medications. When diagnosing a patient with hypertension, for example, a PA may give nutritional advice such as limiting salt intake, changing dietary habits, and participating in cardiovascular exercise, as well as continuing to take prescribed medications.

PAs can also perform certain procedures, depending on their area of specialty. When working in an orthopedic practice setting, for example, PAs can apply a splint to a badly sprained finger or cast a fractured elbow. In a pediatric setting, PAs can suture a child's facial laceration. PAs working in a dermatological office can perform procedures ranging from wart excisions to medical and cosmetic Botox injections, as well as lipodissolve treatments.

Many PAs choose to practice in a surgical setting. When conducting pre-operative care, PAs take patient histories, record vital signs, and handle other tasks that prepare the patient for the surgical procedure. During major surgery, PAs may work as the first or second assistant to the surgeon. Their duties, depending on the type of surgery, could include completing a vein harvest or placing indwelling catheters and tubes such as Foley catheters, intravenous lines, or arterial lines. They may also be called upon to assist in the closure of the surgical incision. PAs may also be responsible for post-operative care of their patient. Duties include the insertion or removal of lines and catheters and chest tubes or changing dressings and bandages. PAs also answer questions from patients and their families regarding the patient's status after the surgery.

Nursing homes, assisted-living communities, and long-term rehabilitation centers are other settings in which PAs practice. In these settings, PAs conduct weekly or monthly assessments of geriatric patients (many of whom have chronic conditions); monitor prescription medicines, nutri-

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tion, or any needed inpatient therapy; and order outpatient services or tests. They start treatment on any new illnesses or injuries common with their patients' age group, such as pneumonia, pressure sores, heart problems, or even dementia. If working with patients in rehab, PAs monitor the types of exercise programs used or track the progress of therapy sessions. Some PAs, especially those working in rural areas, may make house calls. Whether making a monthly patient assessment at a nursing home, a house visit, or daily rounds at a hospital, PAs must report back to their attending physician and give their findings and recommendations.

PAs also have administrative duties. Charting—writing or electronically recording information regarding the patient's conditions, findings, and any recommended treatment—is part of the job, no matter the physician assistant's specialty. Some PAs are responsible for ordering the office or clinic's medical supplies or equipment such as stethoscopes, syringes, vaccines, drugs, and culture kits. They meet with drug representatives or medical supply salespeople to discuss new drugs and equipment. Some PAs, especially those working in a large clinical practice, train and supervise medical technicians and assistants.

Full-time physician assistants work about 40 hours a week, including evenings, weekends, and overnight shifts.

## REQUIREMENTS

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### HIGH SCHOOL

Recommended high school classes include those in anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, mathematics, English, speech, computer science, health, psychology, nutrition, the social sciences, and statistics.

### POSTSECONDARY TRAINING

There are nearly 160 physician assistant training programs in the United States that are accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant ([www.arc-pa.org](http://www.arc-pa.org)). Associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree programs in physician assisting are available. The American Academy of Physician Assistants reports that the average PA program takes 26.5 months to complete. Typical courses in the first year of study include Anatomy and Physiology, Biochemistry, Clinical Laboratory, Clinical Medicine, Medical Ethics, Microbiology, Pathology, and Pharmacology. Second-year classes include Emergency Medicine, Family Medicine, Geriatric Medicine, Internal Medicine, Obstetrics/Gynecology, Orthopedics, Pediatrics, Psychiatry, Radiology, and Surgery. Students also complete clinical rotations in these various practice areas. The Physician Assistant Education Association offers a list of programs at its website, [www.paeonline.org](http://www.paeonline.org). It also offers the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants, a Web-based application service that allows students to apply to more than one program by using the same application. Visit <https://portal.caspaonline.org> for more information.

Physician assistants can also attend postgraduate educational programs in internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, neonatology, rural primary care, emergency medicine, and occupational medicine.

### **CERTIFICATION AND LICENSING**

All states and jurisdictions require physician assistants to pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination, which is administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. Applicants must have graduated from an accredited physician assistant training program. Those who become certified can use the title, physician assistant-certified.

### **Did You Know?**

From 2008 to 2018, nine of the top 20 jobs that are adding the most positions that require an associate's degree or postsecondary vocational award are in the health care industry. They are:

- ✓ Registered Nurses: +582,000 jobs
- ✓ Nursing Aides: +276,000 jobs
- ✓ Licensed Practical Nurses: +156,000 jobs
- ✓ Dental Hygienists: +63,000 jobs
- ✓ Radiologic Technicians and Technologists: +37,000 jobs
- ✓ Medical Records and Health Information Technicians: +35,000 jobs
- ✓ Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians: +25,000 jobs
- ✓ Massage Therapists: +23,000 jobs
- ✓ Surgical Technologists: +23,000 jobs

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

### **OTHER REQUIREMENTS**

Hospital and clinical settings often include many different health care workers. PAs must be team players and be able to work with a variety of workers and personalities. They should have excellent communication skills to interact well with patients and coworkers. Since medical technology is ever changing, PAs must be willing to continue to learn throughout their careers. They often attend seminars, conventions, or continuing-education classes as a requirement for licensure. Other important traits for physician assistants include emotional stability, the ability to make decisions under pressure, a desire to serve others, and compassion for people who are in pain or other discomfort.

### **EXPLORING**

There are many ways to learn more about a career as a physician assistant. You can read books and magazines about the field, visit the websites of

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college physician assisting programs to learn about typical classes and possible career paths, and ask your teacher or school counselor to arrange an information interview with a physician assistant. Professional associations can also provide information about the field. The American Academy of Physician Assistants provides information on education and careers at its website, [www.aapa.org/about-pas](http://www.aapa.org/about-pas). You should also try to land a part-time job in a medical office. This will give you a chance to interact with physician assistants and see if the career is a good fit for your interests and abilities.

### **EMPLOYERS**

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There are more than 74,450 practicing physician assistants in the United States, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA). The AAPA reports that more than 37 percent of physician assistants work at hospitals. Other major employers include single-specialty groups, 24.2 percent; multi-specialty physician groups, 11.2 percent; solo physician practices, 8.6 percent; and community health centers, 4.7 percent.

### **GETTING A JOB**

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Many physician assistants obtain their first jobs as a result of contacts made through college internships or clinical rotations, career fairs, or networking events. Others seek assistance in obtaining job leads from newspaper want ads, college career services offices, and employment websites. Additionally, the American Academy of Physician Assistants provides job listings at its website, [www.aapa.org/find-a-job](http://www.aapa.org/find-a-job). Those interested in positions with the federal government should visit the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's website, [www.usajobs.opm.gov](http://www.usajobs.opm.gov).

### **ADVANCEMENT**

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Physician assistants advance by receiving pay raises and managerial responsibilities. Some pursue postgraduate education and become specialists in internal medicine, emergency medicine, and other areas. Other physician assistants continue their education to become physicians or college professors.

### **EARNINGS**

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Salaries for physician assistants vary by type of employer, geographic region, and the worker's experience, education, and skill level. Salaries for physician assistants ranged from less than \$55,880 to \$115,080 or more in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Full-time clinically practicing PAs had mean annual incomes of \$93,105 in 2009, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants. In 2008, PAs earned the following mean annual salaries by practice area: emergency medicine, \$87,251; surgical subspecialties, \$78,879; dermatology, \$78,418; pediatric subspecialties, \$76,136; and general surgery, \$75,988.

Physician assistants usually receive benefits such as health and life insurance, vacation days, sick leave, and a savings and pension plan. Part-time workers must provide their own benefits.

## EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

Employment for physician assistants is expected to grow much faster than the average for all careers through 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL). Physician assistants are in strong demand as a result of the growing U.S. population and the health care industry's attempts to contain costs (physician assistants are a cost-effective alternative to physicians). Opportunities will be best in rural and inner-city health care facilities. In addition to jobs in traditional office-based settings, the USDOL reports that an increasing number of opportunities will be available in hospitals, public clinics, academic medical centers, and prisons.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on educational programs and careers, contact

**American Academy of  
Physician Assistants**

950 North Washington Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-1552  
703-836-2272  
aapa@aapa.org  
www.aapa.org

For information on certification, contact

**National Commission on  
Certification of Physician  
Assistants**

12000 Findley Road, Suite 200  
Duluth, GA 30097-1409  
678-417-8100  
nccpa@nccpa.net  
www.nccpa.net

For information on accredited educational programs, contact

**Physician Assistant  
Education Association**

300 North Washington Street,  
Suite 710  
Alexandria, VA 22314-2544  
703-548-5538  
info@paeaonline.org  
www.paeaonline.org

## Interview: Kara D. Larson

The editors of *Hot Health Care Careers* discussed the career of physician assistant with Kara D. Larson, MSPAS, PA-C a physician assistant and the vice president (2009-2010) of the Student Academy of the American Academy of Physician Assistants.

**Q. What made you want to enter this career?**

**A.** I wanted to practice medicine since my seventh-grade life science course. That was the easy decision; the hard decision was what medical career was right for me. Going into college, I labored over the decision between a nursing or pre-med major. After much time comparing both fields, I realized I was more interested in the medical decision-making of taking care of a patient and chose pre-med.

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When I graduated from college, I again was faced with a tough decision: medical school or physician assistant (PA) school. Both programs are fundamentally the same, learning multiple disease processes and their treatment while assimilating the vast number of patient skills. I chose to become a PA instead of a M.D., not because I couldn't handle the rigors of medical school, but because of the difference in lifestyle I would have as a PA.

Becoming a PA takes 2.5 years after college whereas becoming an M.D. takes four years after college for medical school and then three to seven years of residency before you are prepared to enter the medical field. This shorter time frame for PA school, with a corresponding lower amount of student loans for repayment, made the profession very attractive to me. I had the ability to start working with a practice as well as start my family sooner without being overwhelmed with large loan repayments.

Another attractive aspect of the PA profession is the flexibility to work in various medical specialties. An M.D. must decide in medical school what specialty he will devote his entire life to, whereas a PA has the ability to work in different specialties throughout his career. Also, the PA shares the pressure of being the "final decision-maker." A PA works within the medical team, making decisions together with the M.D. and always has the ability to consult with his supervising physician for final decisions.

**Q. What is one thing that young people may not know about a career as a physician assistant?**

**A.** Young people may have encountered PAs in the primary care fields (family practice, pediatrics, women's health) as their health care providers. Therefore, they may not be aware that PAs practice in such diverse specialties as emergency medicine, internal medicine, neurology, dermatology, multiple surgical specialties, and many others. Numerous fields are open to PAs, leading to a wonderful career in which you will never be bored!

**Q. If you could do anything differently in preparing for your career in college/high school, what would it be?**

**A.** I would shadow PAs in various specialties for a better understanding of the flexibility of PAs throughout the medical field. I didn't understand this flexibility (a great plus for the profession) until I was on clinical rotations during PA school.

**Q. Can you please briefly describe a day in your life on the job?**

**A.** I work in a family medicine/urgent care office with two physicians and two other PAs. We work 12-hour shifts, with two days on and two days off. I begin my day by looking over lab and x-ray reports from my last shift, determining if a patient needs to return to discuss lab results and have more testing or if the nurse on duty should notify the patient of normal results.

At 8 A.M. patients are triaged and placed in exam rooms. Our office does not take appointments, so I never know the next problem I will encounter, and I spend the next 12 hours treating complaints ranging

from sore throat to chest pain to prescription refills, charting as I go. I see all ages of patients—ranging from the youngest to the oldest. I spend the day determining when labs and x-rays should be ordered and interpreting those results as well as writing numerous prescriptions for antibiotics, diabetes and high blood pressure medicine, and pain medicine.

As a part of the practice we see many urgent-care cases, so I get lots of opportunities to suture lacerations, cast broken bones, and drain abscesses. I work alongside my supervising physician but have autonomy in my work. The M.D. is there for help when I need it for a difficult patient scenario, but I am not required to have his approval for my plan or to have him sign my chart or prescriptions. I may go through the entire day without needing consultation or may have several complicated patients requiring his assistance. In these cases, we always work as a team, making the best decision together. Though I have a large amount of autonomy during the day, I must always remember one of the most important pieces of information I learned in PA school: “Know what you don’t know and when you need help.” At the end of a normal day I’ve seen and treated 20-30 patients. I’m tired, but I always finish with the overwhelming satisfaction of having made a difference.

**Q. What are the most important personal and professional qualities for people in your career?**

- A.** Compassion is the number-one quality for all PAs. Compassion is the source of all other qualities exhibited by the best PAs. It is the guide during the difficult days of school when you feel like giving up the overwhelming task of learning the mountain of medical information. It is the quality that spurs you into studying and reading so you can provide the best information to your patients, and it is the quality that endears your patients to you.

**Q. What are some of the pros and cons of your job?**

**A.** Pros:

- ✓ Having the amazing responsibility to guide patients and help them make life-changing decisions (a pro because of the amazing privilege).
- ✓ Building a relationship with a patient and his/her family.
- ✓ Working in a growing profession—it’s only headed up!
- ✓ The availability to work in multiple specialties. M.D.s must decide in medical school which specialty they will work in for the rest of their lives; however, PAs are free to navigate the medical field and work in any specialty (family practice, neurology, surgery, etc.), with only on-the-job training required.

Cons:

- ✓ Having the amazing responsibility to guide patients and help them make life-changing decisions (a con because of the stress involved in decision making).

## Did You Know?

Physician assistants in Mississippi earned the highest mean annual income (\$112,093) in 2008, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants. Other top-paying states for physician assistants include Delaware (\$105,083), Alaska (\$105,071), Nevada (\$103,609), California (\$102,144), and Connecticut (\$100,958). The three lowest-paying states were North Dakota (\$81,358), Pennsylvania (\$82,001), and South Dakota (\$82,421).

- ✓ Long hours and very busy days. There is a shortage of medical providers, which leads to pressure to see a large number of patients per day, leading to less comprehensive care.
- ✓ Jobs in certain specialties are limited by the number of physicians who are entering the field, since PAs must work in a team with physicians.

**Q. What advice would you give to young people who are interested in becoming physician assistants?**

- A.** Study hard, and work harder! Due to the small number of PA schools compared to medical schools, as well as the exponential growth of the profession, admission is very competitive.

Shadow multiple PAs in various specialties and settings (i.e., hospital and outpatient) to understand how PAs function. The PA role is variable based on specialty. The family-practice PA is relatively autonomous, whereas the surgical PA may work closer to his supervising PA in the surgical setting.

If possible, work as a medical assistant or patient care technician in a hospital. This is not the most glamorous job (it involves bed changes and patient baths), but it will give you a glimpse into the health care setting as well as teach you basic skills. You will be ahead of your classmates if you already know how to take vital signs (blood pressure, pulse, respirations), start IVs, and perform blood-draws. This experience will help you develop one of the most important skills in medicine—patient assessment. Patient assessment is the ability to determine the overall condition of a patient with simple observation of external signs (i.e., the subtlety of determining breathing difficulty and ill-appearing features of patients). This skill cannot be taught; it is developed with experience.