

November 4, 2009

Dear Mr. Ghosh:

In TIME's recent "The Case of the Missing Assistant Surgeon" article, Scott Haig spotlights the nationwide shortage of doctors specializing in surgery and the resulting reliance on other providers, including physician assistants (PAs), to help fill in the gap.

Haig states that hospitals "resort" to using physician assistants and that PAs are "like surgical residents who never graduate." He contends that PAs "don't have the mind-set of a doctor who stands - or will soon stand - in the lead position." Haig further implies that overall, PAs and other surgical assistants do not have the capacity to respond to things gone awry during surgery, and in the end, can endanger a patient's life.

There is no evidence that supports Dr. Haig's hypotheses. While PAs have great respect for the rigor and length of physician training, and always practice as members of physician-led teams, the implications that PAs are somehow inadequate as assistants at surgery is inaccurate. PAs go through a rigorous training program to provide high-quality care for primary care patients, as well as those across a broad range of clinical specialties, including surgery. While it is true that training for PAs is shorter in duration than that of physicians, they receive an extensive medical education:

- PAs complete more than 400 hours in basic sciences, 75 hours in pharmacology, 175 hours in behavioral sciences, and nearly 580 hours of clinical medicine;
- They complete at least 2000 hours of supervised clinical practice prior to graduation;
- They also must earn and log 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and take a recertification exam every six years.

PAs are *not* "like surgical residents who never graduate." PAs must pass a national certifying examination administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants and are licensed to practice as integral members of medical and surgical teams.

The scrupulous education that PAs receive pays off. Emory University has studied the use of PAs in cardiothoracic surgery for 30 years,[\[1\]](#) and evidence demonstrates PA competence in the operating room.

Additionally, Flint Michigan's Hurley Hospital 23-year use of PAs has allowed the Level I trauma center to establish effective and efficient surgical coverage while expanding its trauma program.<sup>[iii]</sup> The Hurley study of the use of PAs in trauma surgery has found that PAs are, "superb assistants to surgeons and surgical residents in the operating room."<sup>[iii]</sup>

*Many industry leaders also recognize the value of PAs in resident medical education. Since the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education has limited the number of work hours for residents, there has been a surge in articles by various medical publications such as *The Journal of Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care*, the *Archives of Surgery*, the *Journal of Surgical Education*, and the *American Journal of Surgery*, that reach the same conclusion: adding PAs to a surgical service as an enhancement to residents provides not only important continuity of care, but also permits residents to focus on more complicated surgical cases, thereby enhancing resident education. In one study conducted at various trauma centers in Colorado, adding a PA to a dedicated trauma team allowed surgeons to assign PAs to assist on less severe trauma cases, freeing surgical residents to assist on more complicated cases.* <sup>[iv]</sup>

Contrary to Haig's comments, PAs are well-educated providers offering high-quality care who contribute to the enhancement of resident education. Hospitals don't "resort" to using physician assistants, but rather make an evidence-based decision to include PAs on surgical teams.

As you continue to provide health care advice to readers, we encourage you to inform them about the capabilities and attributions that PAs have added to the health care system. We hope this information is helpful and would like to extend our services to you as a resource for any future health care stories you consider.

Sincerely,

*Howard Glassroth*

Vice President, Communications  
American Academy of Physician Assistants