

Physician Assistants: Partners in Medicine

It's 4:00a.m. and you're awakened with crushing chest pain. You know something is not right and call an ambulance to take you to the hospital. You're rushed to the emergency department and met by a team that immediately begins your evaluation and care. Leading the team is a person who introduces herself as a "Physician Assistant". Right away she asks about your symptoms, performs a physical examination, orders tests, and prescribes medication that is soon easing your pain. Your tests show you are having a heart attack, so immediately she orders medication to help dissolve clots and reduce the damage. She contacts your doctor and you are admitted to the intensive care unit. A few days later, you're home and feeling much better. You later ask who treated you so well, and want to know "What is a physician assistant"?

A **physician assistant** or **PA** is a nationally board certified, licensed healthcare professional trained to diagnose and treat illnesses and injuries following the same education and practice model as physicians. The first PA training program began in 1965 at Duke University in North Carolina. At that time, there was a shortage of primary care physicians, and highly trained military medical corpsmen were returning from service to no comparable civilian employment opportunities. To expand the delivery of quality medical care and capitalize on the excellent training of the corpsmen, the physician assistant role was born. There are now over 50,000 PAs nationwide in all 50 states with over 6,000 licensed in New York State, the most of any state. And, with 23 PA training programs, New York State is the leading PA educator as well.

PA training programs are accredited by an independent organization supported by the American Medical Association. Before admission to the rigorous, two-year training program, most PAs obtain a bachelor's degree, and have over four years of healthcare experience. Many programs now offer a master's degree. After graduation, and in order to practice in New York State, a PA must pass the national certification examination. To maintain national certification and stay abreast of medical advances, a PA must earn 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years, and sit for the national recertification examination every six years.

Physician assistants are dependent practitioners with a commitment to quality patient care. Your physician may delegate to the PA any procedure or task that is routinely performed within the scope of your physician's practice and consistent with the education and experience of the PA. PAs work as healthcare team members with their supervising physician providing a broad range of medical and surgical care augmenting, not replacing, your physician. While the physician may not have to be physically present, the physician is always available for consultation and is responsible for the PA's actions and your overall care.

In New York, PAs provide medical care in a wide variety of settings in nearly any place you'd find a physician including hospitals, clinics, private physician offices, multi-specialty groups, schools, HMOs, correctional facilities, nursing homes, industry, and more from the most rural family practices to the busiest inner-city hospitals. PAs are

trained to care for all age groups, and amongst the multiple services PAs provide, they first-assist in surgery, perform complete history and physical examinations, order and interpret tests and x-rays, suture lacerations, set broken bones, prescribe medications, and educate not only patients and their families, but students of all levels. A 2001 survey by the American Academy of Physician Assistants shows that 48% work in primary care and 39% in hospitals including 21% in surgery and 10% in emergency departments. While in the early years the majority of PAs were men, now 56% are women.

Along with providing quality medical care, PAs are well-known for providing excellent customer service in a cost-effective manner. PAs are able to spend more time with patients and their families giving that extra touch that means so much when you are not feeling well. With the healthcare dollar being so tight, PAs provide less-expensive medical care making it more available and accessible. Most PA services are reimbursed by insurance carriers, and at a lower rate than physicians.

In New York State, PAs are represented by the New York State Society of Physician Assistants. With its executive office in New York City and its lobbying firm in Albany, NYSSPA prides itself on promoting the strengths and growth of the PA profession around the State. **To learn more about Physician Assistants in New York State, please visit our web site (<http://www.nvsspa.org>) or call our executive office toll-free at (877) 769-7722.**