



### **MODULE 3**

#### **UNDERSTANDING MEDICAL REGULATION IN THE UNITED STATES: PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT LICENSURE**

##### **Slide 1: Understanding Physician Assistant Licensure**

*What role do physician assistants play in the U.S. health care system, and how are they trained and licensed?*

##### **Slide 2: About this educational module**

Welcome to “Understanding Physician Assistant Licensure.” This presentation provides a general introduction to the process that physician assistants must go through to become licensed in the United States.

It is intended to supplement information you may receive from your state medical board on this topic.

This module is one of several offered by the FSMB to help you succeed as a board member. Our goal is to help you be well-informed and effective as you go about your work. Be sure to watch the other modules in this series, offered at the FSMB’s website.

##### **Slide 3: Introduction to physician assistant licensure**

As a state medical board member, overseeing the licensure of health professionals will be one of your most important duties. This requires a good understanding of how the licensure process works.

In Module 2, we discussed the process that physicians must go through to become licensed in the United States.

While physicians, by far, make up most of the health professionals licensed by state medical boards, it is important to note that many boards also license others, in addition to physicians. These categories range from podiatrists and surgical assistants to athletic trainers.

Of these, one of the largest professional categories licensed by most state medical boards is physician assistants.

Physician assistants – known as “PAs” – are a fast-growing segment of the health care workforce, and play an important role in medicine.

In this module, we will focus on the fundamentals of how physician assistants are licensed in the United States.

Beyond this module, we recommend that you seek more information about the licensing requirements for the other health professionals in your state – in addition to physicians and PAs. You can get this information from the state medical board on which you serve.

As we discuss the licensure of physician assistants, we'll focus on the core details of how PAs obtain a license to legally practice – highlighting the requirements that apply to all PAs in the United States. Keep in mind that individual states and territories, through their Medical Practice Acts, may have more licensure requirements that apply to the PAs who practice within their borders only.

Our goal in this module will be to help you understand broadly how physician assistants are licensed.

#### **Slide 4: A brief history of the PA profession**

Before we begin, let's explore briefly the work that PAs do – and how they differ from physicians and other health professionals.

The PA profession evolved in the 1960s as a way to improve and expand health care.

At that time, physicians and educators recognized that there was a growing shortage of primary care physicians in the United States. As the issue began to receive more attention, one individual stepped forward with a unique idea.

Dr. Eugene Stead, chairman of the Department of Medicine at Duke University, created a two-year program at Duke to formally train a new category of medical worker -- which he termed "physician assistants."

These new health care professionals would receive specific training so they could provide medical care for rural and other medically underserved populations, working under physician supervision.

This would bolster the medical workforce, helping address the physician shortage in the United States.

Dr. Stead based the curriculum for his PA program on his knowledge of the accelerated "fast-track" training that doctors received during World War II. This model had ensured a steady stream of medical corpsmen during the war, and continued to be important during the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s.

Dr. Stead and others recognized that many corpsmen were returning from Vietnam – and that they were well-trained for surgical conditions as well as general care.

In the fall of 1965, four ex-Navy corpsmen began PA-training as undergraduates at Duke, under Dr. Stead's direction. They had already received considerable medical training, and Dr. Stead extended their skills. The first PA class graduated from Duke's program in the fall of 1967.

The PA concept was quickly embraced by the medical profession and gained federal support in the 1970s as a way to address physician shortages.

In the decades that followed, Dr. Stead's model evolved and new programs emerged, leading to a national certification process, standardized examinations, and the development of requirements for continuing medical education.

#### **Slide 5: PA growth in the United States**

The PA profession has grown substantially since it was first developed in the 1960s.

Today, there are 250 accredited PA programs in the United States. Approximately 140,000 PAs practice throughout the nation, as well as internationally, and the profession continues to rapidly grow. In just five years, between 2014 and 2019, the ranks of PAs nationally increased by 37%.

Just as Dr. Stead and others had theorized in the 1960s, PAs have become an important part of the health care workforce -- particularly in rural and underserved areas.

### **Slide 6: Differences between physicians and PAs**

How do PAs differ from physicians?

PAs and physicians both care for patients, but each has different requirements and responsibilities.

PAs are health professionals who practice medicine in collaboration with or under the supervision of a physician, depending on state laws. Their role is not to replace the work of a physician, but to supplement it. Physicians do not need to be physically present with PAs as they work, and collaboration or supervision increasingly occurs via telemedicine.

Physicians, on the other hand, are able to diagnose patients and prescribe treatment in an independent practice. They have full knowledge in a specific field of medicine for which patients seek care and have complete responsibility for taking a patient through diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.

PAs work in all areas of medicine, ranging from primary care and family medicine to emergency medicine, cardiology and others.

### **Slide 7: Physician assistant duties**

While the range of medical activities they engage in is more limited than physicians, PAs can perform a variety of tasks, including:

- Taking and reviewing medical histories
- Examining patients
- Diagnosing and treating illnesses
- Ordering and interpreting lab tests
- Prescribing medicine in some cases
- Educating and counseling patients and their families and assessing medical progress

### **Slide 8: Physician assistant scope-of-practice**

The scope of practice of physician assistants varies by jurisdiction and health care setting. Many patients see PAs for routine medical care provided at their physician's office, but PAs also provide valuable assistance for physician specialists, such as surgeons or pediatricians.

A PA working with a surgeon, for example, may close incisions and provide care before, during, and after the operation. A PA working with a pediatrician may examine a child or provide vaccinations.

In some areas, especially in rural and medically underserved communities, PAs may serve as primary care providers at clinics where a physician may be present only occasionally.

It is important to note the difference between PAs and another common component of medical teams -- known as medical assistants. Medical assistants provide routine clinical and clerical tasks for physicians, but they do not practice medicine, as PAs do.

### **Slide 9: Where do physician assistants work?**

Where do PAs work? PAs may be found in a wide range of medical settings -- from primary care to dozens of specialties. While PAs receive training as medical generalists, trends show that they are increasingly transitioning into specialty practice.

Almost 40% of PAs currently specialize in family medicine, internal medicine or a surgical subspecialty. Others are distributed among specialty areas such as dermatology, psychiatry, emergency medicine and pediatrics.

Roughly 80% of PAs practice in either a hospital or an office-based private-practice setting.

### **Slide 10: Obtaining a physician assistant's license**

Obtaining a license to become a PA in the United States is a rigorous process. Through licensing, state medical boards ensure that all practicing PAs have appropriate education and training. It also ensures that they abide by recognized standards of professional conduct while serving patients.

Many PAs have had substantial previous experience in health care -- working in such roles as emergency medical technician, paramedic, nurse, or respiratory therapist. But all must go through the same standardized training to attain the status of PA.

The path to becoming a licensed PA begins with completion of PA training at an accredited program. PAs may then become nationally certified and obtain a state license in the state in which they want to practice.

PA licensure requirements vary, but all U.S. states, territories and the District of Columbia require that PAs graduate from an accredited PA program and pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam -- also known as PANCE.

The PANCE exam is administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants -- the NCCPA.

### **Slide 11: How are PAs educated and trained?**

What kind of education and training do PAs go through? PAs typically need to complete at least two years of college coursework in basic and behavioral sciences before applying to a PA program, which is very similar to premedical studies. Prerequisites may include courses such as chemistry, anatomy, biology and other basic sciences. Many PA programs also require prior health care experience entailing patient care. Many PAs have backgrounds as paramedics, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), or registered nurses.

Most PA students have acquired a bachelor's degree and several years of experience before entering a program.

### **Slide 12: How are PAs educated and trained?**

PA programs usually entail approximately three years of academics and professional training, culminating in a master's-level degree. They include both classroom instruction as well as clinical rotations. In addition to basic sciences, PA students also receive training in pharmacology, pathophysiology, clinical laboratory science, medical ethics and other targeted areas of medicine.

Just like physicians, PAs may participate in a variety of clinical rotations, ranging from internal medicine and pediatrics to obstetrics and general surgery.

PA programs in the United States are accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant, known as ARC-PA. ARC-PA ensures that PA programs meet established standards for function, structure and performance.

### **Slide 13: Continuing Medical Education for PAs**

PAs who have completed their training, passed the PANCE exam and are engaging in continuing medical education may use the title of Physician Assistant-Certified or PA-C.

In order to maintain their status as a PA-C, PAs must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education credits every two years and take a recertification exam -- called the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam -- also known as PANRE -- every 10 years.

Nearly every state medical board requires either a minimum number of continuing medical education hours, current certification by the NCCPA -- or both -- as a condition of PA license renewal, once a license has been acquired.

Some jurisdictions impose additional requirements for applicants who have had an extended break from clinical practice.

Every state has its own rules, fee structure, process and timeline for license application and renewal. Be sure to become familiar with your state's requirements.

### **Slide 14: Applying for PA licensure**

With all requirements filled, PAs may apply for a medical license to practice in a particular state or territory. They also may apply to practice in multiple states or territories -- but a formal license must be issued by every jurisdiction within which they want to practice.

When a state medical board receives a PA's license application, an important final step is the verification process. The board will verify that the PA's credentials are in order -- checking educational background and confirming that the PA has successfully passed the PANCE exam.

### **Slide 15: U.S. physician assistant licensure statistics**

Every year, the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants publishes its Statistical Report of Certified Physician Assistants -- the most comprehensive statistical information about PAs available.

The most recent data from the NCCPA offers a few key statistics that help provide insight into PA licensure in the United States:

- Nearly 140,000 certified PAs are now in practice nationwide.

- Approximately 69% of certified PAs are women, and approximately 31% are men.
- The largest age category for PAs is 30 to 39 years of age, representing roughly 38% of the PA workforce. The next category is 40 to 49 years of age, representing roughly 23% of the PA workforce. More than 80% of PAs are under the age of 50 and the median age of PAs is 38.

#### **Slide 16: U.S. physician assistant licensure statistics**

- PAs are increasingly meeting health needs in rural areas. The top five states ranked in order by concentration per 100,000 population are Alaska, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Maine and Idaho.
- The percentage of certified PAs practicing in a surgical subspecialty has increased by 70% since 2013.
- Full-time PAs treat an average of 73 patients a week.

As the environment for team-based medicine evolves in the United States, it is expected that the PA profession will continue to grow.

#### **Slide 17: Learn about PA licensure in YOUR state**

This concludes Module 3 – Understanding Physician Assistant Licensure.

Take some time now to learn more about the specifics of PA licensure in your state, including:

- How requirements for PA licensure are spelled out by your Medical Practice Act.
- What steps are required by your state’s licensure process.
- How your state goes about verifying credentials and vetting candidates for PA licensure.
- What kind of data is available about the licensees in your state, including demographics and practice information.
- How licensure requirements and processes may differ between the various other health professions your board regulates.

While this module focuses on the licensure of PAs, it is important that you learn as much as you can about the licensing processes of the other health professions your board may regulate. Check with staff of your medical board for the best sources of information about licensure within these other professions.

#### **Slide 18: Additional resources**

For more information, you can refer to these additional resources.

- [NCCPA Statistical Report of Certified Physician Assistants](https://prodcmsstoragesa.blob.core.windows.net/uploads/files/2019StatisticalProfileofCertifiedPhysicianAssistants.pdf) (Available at <https://prodcmsstoragesa.blob.core.windows.net/uploads/files/2019StatisticalProfileofCertifiedPhysicianAssistants.pdf>)
- [National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants](https://www.nccpa.net/) (Available at <https://www.nccpa.net/>)
- [Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant](http://www.arc-pa.org/) (Available at <http://www.arc-pa.org/>)
- [Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam](https://www.nccpa.net/BecomingCertified) (Available at <https://www.nccpa.net/BecomingCertified>)

- [U.S. Medical Regulatory Trends and Actions Report, 2018](https://www.fsmb.org/siteassets/advocacy/publications/us-medical-regulatory-trends-actions.pdf) (Available at <https://www.fsmb.org/siteassets/advocacy/publications/us-medical-regulatory-trends-actions.pdf>)

**Slide 19: Thank you**

This concludes **Understanding Physician Assistant Licensure**. Be sure to view additional modules, with more detailed information, at [www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org).

Thank you for participating!

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