



WISCONSIN ACADEMY OF PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

TO: Representative Frederick Kessler, Chair
Senator Luther Olsen, Vice-Chair
Members, Special Committee on Health Care Access

FROM: Clark Collins, PA-C, President
Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants

DATE: October 22, 2010

RE: Increasing Access to Healthcare – The Role of PAs

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before the committee today.

My name is Clark Collins – I am a practicing Physician Assistant in orthopedic surgery with Dean Health System in Madison. I am also the President of the Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants (WAPA), representing Physician Assistants practicing throughout Wisconsin, and I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony to the committee today.

As this committee examines ways to increase access to healthcare services in Wisconsin, especially in rural and other underserved areas, those of us in the Physician Assistant profession would like to assure you that we are ready to assist you as a part of the solution to increase healthcare access.

What Is a Physician Assistant?

Physician assistants (PAs) are health professionals licensed to provide medical services with physician supervision. PAs perform a comprehensive range of medical duties, from basic primary care to high-technology specialty procedures. PAs often act as first or second assistants in major surgery and provide pre- and postoperative care.

In some rural areas where physicians are in short supply, PAs serve as the primary providers of health care, conferring with their supervising physicians and other medical professionals as needed and as required by law. PAs can be found in virtually every medical and surgical specialty.

The PA's responsibilities depend on the type of practice, his or her experience, the working relationship with physicians and other health care providers, and state law. There are approximately 68,100 practicing PAs in the United States as of January 2009 with about 1,800 practicing in Wisconsin.

Physician Assistant Training

PAs are trained in their own nationally accredited professional training programs, of which there are currently three in Wisconsin, and one more in development. A PA Program is typically two to three years of medical

training that includes both classroom study and clinical rotations. PAs are trained in a very similar curriculum as medical students, sometimes sharing classes with medical students. PAs are trained across all medical specialties, with an emphasis on primary care. PA programs in Wisconsin encourage graduates to practice in primary care specialties upon graduation.

After graduation, PAs must pass a national certifying exam before obtaining a permanent Wisconsin license and becoming eligible to practice in Wisconsin. During a PA's career, one must obtain 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and pass a recertification examination every 6 years- the most stringent continuing education guidelines in the medical profession. Both the initial certification and recertification exams are written with an emphasis on primary care and cover many different areas of medicine and medical therapeutics.

What Care Can Physician Assistants Provide?

In order to practice PAs must be supervised by a physician, and under current Wisconsin law, a physician may supervise two PAs at any given time.

The scope of PA practice in Wisconsin is governed by Chapter Med 8 of the Administrative Code. PAs can generally perform the same medical duties that their supervising physician is qualified to perform, with only a few exceptions such as acupuncture and chiropractic care. The dependent practice of a PA under the supervision of a physician is fundamental to the PA profession.

PAs perform medical functions that in the past have been performed by licensed physicians, including but not limited to:

Taking medical histories	Treating illnesses
Performing physical exams	Counseling patients
Ordering laboratory tests	Promoting wellness
Diagnosing illnesses	Assisting in surgery
Prescribing medicine	

How Can PAs Help Alleviate Provider Shortages?

With the emphasis on primary care in PA training and certification, PAs are especially qualified to practice in rural and underserved locations and help increase healthcare access for thousands of patients around the state. In many settings, PAs are the first, and possibly, the only healthcare providers patients will see, but PAs must practice under the supervision of a physician – we do not practice independently. We also do not seek independent practice. However, physicians may supervise only two PAs at a time, as outlined in Chapter Med 8, meaning that a single physician in an underserved area can account for three highly trained health providers if he or she also supervises a two PAs. The Medical Examining Board is presently discussing amendments to Med 8 to change the MD to PA ratio and allow for more PAs to be supervised by one physician. This change could dramatically increase healthcare access to patients across the state.

Much of the Committee's discussion to date has focused on training more physicians and nurses in Wisconsin, and finding ways to encourage more Wisconsin-trained physicians and nurses to remain and practice here. There are currently three PA training programs in Wisconsin: UW-Madison, UW-La Crosse and Marquette University. These programs graduate close to 100 students every year. Another program at Carroll University

is under development. As with physicians and nurses, efforts to increase PA instruction and training, as well as PA recruitment and retention in Wisconsin would be beneficial. Removing barriers in PA practice would also be beneficial.

Here in Wisconsin, we need to allow PAs to practice up to the level of their knowledge and abilities. For example, in 2005 Assembly Bill 683 was introduced to allow Nurse Practitioners and PAs legally authorize services their training qualifies them to do: ordering physical therapy services, completing Department of Motor Vehicles medical reports, ordering patient restraints and ordering home health services. The legislation went forward (2005 Act 187) granting those privileges to Nurse Practitioners, but a late amendment by the bill's author stripped all reference to PAs from the legislation. 2009 SB 698 was introduced last spring to restore those provisions relating to PAs stripped from the 2005 legislation. WAPA intends to seek similar legislation in 2011, and would encourage the Committee to consider including SB 698 in its ultimate recommendations.

I reference these pieces of legislation to point out that the training, education and practice styles of non-physician health care providers makes it reasonable and appropriate to create the legal authority to maximize the services that they can provide to Wisconsin health care consumers. This will improve patient access to health care at little or no cost.

PAs are a part of the solution to improving healthcare access in Wisconsin and across the country. We must continue to educate and empower PAs so they can continue to provide excellent patient care and expand their reach to more rural and underserved areas of the state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions, and am happy to provide additional information about PA education, training and practice that you may find useful.