

**Friday, October 07, 2011**

**Physician assistants are key to health care's future**

Wilton Kennedy and Ken Anderson

Kennedy is director of Clinical Education/Associate Professor at Jefferson College of Health Sciences PA Program. Anderson is a physician assistant with Primary Care Associates and is president of the Virginia Academy of Physician Assistants.

As reported in The Roanoke Times and other media outlets, there is a smoldering crisis in the U.S. health care system. The Affordable Care Act of 2010 could provide 32 million currently uninsured Americans with health care coverage. But insured or not, patients will continue to find crowded waiting rooms in overflowing doctor's offices.

The American Association of Medical Colleges predicts the current supply of physicians will be unable to keep up with the projected increase in demand. By 2025, a shortage of 124,000 physicians is expected.

As more baby boomers retire, they will continue to aggressively seek medical services to allow them to maintain an active lifestyle and are more likely to seek medical care than previous generations. The 30 percent expansion currently under way will not eliminate the projected shortage. For this reason, the AAMC and other physician organizations continue to offer strong support for physician assistants to help meet the anticipated health care needs.

So what is a PA, and who are we? First and foremost, PAs exist to extend access to medical care to patients in need. PAs are licensed health professionals who deliver high-quality care so more patients can get needed care. With our physician supervisors, we work in a broad range of medical, specialty and surgical services to diverse populations in both rural and urban settings.

PAs perform physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel on preventive health care, assist in surgery and prescribe medications. The profession began in 1967 at Duke University and has enjoyed steady growth, strong support by our physician partners and wide patient acceptance. There are more than 81,000 certified practicing PAs across the country. In 2008, approximately 257 million patient visits were made and more than 332 million prescriptions were written by PAs.

In Virginia, there are approximately 2,100 PAs working in all specialties. Four PA schools throughout the state train students. Jefferson College of Health Sciences was the first PA program in the state to accept students and has graduated 334 to date. Many have remained in the area. PA education generally consists of an average of 27 months post-baccalaureate training, including more than 2,000 hours of supervised practice during clinical rotations plus a master's degree.

PAs are trained as generalists, but practice in all areas and must pass a national certification exam. In an area like Roanoke, there can be a significant delay in time for a patient to see a provider. PAs can decrease this long wait by enabling physicians to see more patients. Last year, PAs were invited to become members of the Medical Society of Virginia. With this alliance, PAs and physicians work

together with the common goal of serving the needs of patients in Virginia. This alliance also is based on the tenet that the physician is the one who delegates the PA's scope of practice.

It is clear that physician assistants have become a significant part of the health care system, providing quality care in all specialties. With the intensive training required for the profession and a focus on team-based practice with physicians, PAs have gained widespread acceptance by the public and within the medical community. Our impact will be much more critical in the next decade as the demand for health care increases.

**THE ROANOKE TIMES**  
roanoke.com

Copyright © 2011