

## **OPPORTUNITIES IN**

### **Physician Assistant and Nurse Practitioner**

Physician assistants and nurse practitioners have continued to develop important roles in the delivery of health care in recent years. Both professionals have extensive education requirements and provide the public with wide range of services. Physician assistants and nurse practitioners fill important roles in the health care delivery system and lead fulfilling careers. Many of the physician assistants and nurse practitioners in rural communities are the only source of primary health care in their communities.

Both physician assistants and nurse practitioners are in demand nationwide, especially in the rural areas. These professions are among the top career choices and with increasing demand their salaries will continue to rise.

### **Physician Assistants**

#### **What is a Physician Assistant?**

Physician Assistants (PAs) are skilled members of the health care team who, working dependently under the supervision of licensed physicians, provide a broad range of medical services in almost all health care settings.

The PA profession began in 1965 at Duke University where the first PA training program consisted of four former military corpsmen. Today some 28,000 PAs practice in the U.S., almost 18,000 of who are members of the American Academy of Physician Assistants, the national organization representing PAs.

#### **Role of the Physician Assistant**

The Physician Assistant provides diagnostic and therapeutic health care so that physicians can spend more time on complex patient problems. Working under physician supervision, PAs take patient histories, perform physical examinations, and order laboratory tests. Once medical problems are diagnosed, PAs develop treatment plans and explain them to patients. They recommend medications and drug therapies and, in nearly all states, have the authority to write prescriptions.

PAs provide a wide range of primary care, as well as care in specialty areas. Those PAs trained in programs that emphasize surgery and surgical care are known as Surgeon's Assistants (SAs).

#### **Practice Settings**

Physician Assistants work in a variety of settings, including private practice, hospitals, health maintenance organizations, long term care facilities, student health services, and urban and rural clinics.

The U.S. Government, which has helped fund PA educational programs since 1971, employs PAs in the military, Veterans Administration, Bureau of Prisons, Public Health Service, and other agencies.

## Education

Physician Assistants are taught in educational programs located primarily in university schools of medicine and allied health. A PA program has been developed in South Dakota at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

There are 120 accredited PA programs nationwide, most of which require 24 months to complete, although some are as short as 14 months or as long as 48 months. Many programs require applicants to have completed two years of college prior to admission and to have previous health care experience.

The education of PA students is somewhat similar to that of medical students: A nine to 12 month didactic phase is followed by 12 to 15 months of supervised clinical experiences (also called rotations). An academic degree and/or certificate is awarded upon graduation, depending on the institution and the education background of the student.

Physician assistant programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, which is recognized by the federal government as the national accrediting agency for allied health programs. Accreditation is based on quality standards deemed essential for PA education.

## Credentials

PAs are certified by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants after passing an examination developed by the National Board of Medical Examiners. PAs maintain this certification by earning 100 hours of continuing education every two years. Recertification is required every six years.

## Impact on Health Care Delivery

PAs, working with physicians, promote better distribution of health care services and can improve access to care in rural and underserved communities, as well as among the elderly. They also increase efficiency within ambulatory care practices, reduce patient waiting time, and allow physicians more time for difficult cases.

PAs improve patient rapport, compliance, and satisfaction through increased counseling and education and can reduce the frequency and duration of costly hospitalization by stressing preventive health care. The use of PAs also prevents higher costs for health care through increased practice productivity.

For more information on PAs or PA programs, call or write.

### **The American Academy of Physician Assistants**

950 North Washington St.

Arlington, VA 22314

703-836-2272

[www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org)

## **Nurse Practitioners**

What is a Nurse Practitioner?

Nurse Practitioners are experienced registered nurses (RNs) with a masters degree in nursing. There are approximately 80,000 nurse practitioners around the country. They have had specialized education to prepare them to work in clinics, hospitals and other health care agencies. Nurse practitioners can specialize in the care specific persons, children, adults, or the elderly. Most nurse practitioners practice in rural areas as family or adult nurse practitioners. However, they may also specialize in specific types of care:

- Acute
- Adult
- Emergency
- Family
- Gerontology
- Neonatal
- Occupational Health
- Oncology
- Pediatric/Child Health
- Psychiatric/Mental Health
- Women's Health

## Role of Nurse Practitioners

The responsibilities of a nurse practitioner include conducting physical examinations and other health assessments plus diagnosing and treating common health problems. They also prescribe treatments and/or medicines for managing health problems, along with ordering and interpreting diagnostic studies.

Nurse practitioners are involved in managing the care of individuals with chronic illness such as diabetes and providing health education for individuals and groups. They also promote wellness, provide holistic health care, which includes the physical, emotional, and spiritual, and promote the ability to care for oneself when ill. They also counsel individuals and families and educate individuals, families, and groups regarding their illness, lifestyle changes, and their treatment plan.

## Education Requirements

To become a nurse practitioner, a registered nurse must obtain a master's degree in nursing. Nurse practitioner education provides the knowledge and clinical, technical and ethical learning experiences for delivery of care and role development for advanced nursing practice. Emphasis is placed on the clinical and professional expertise necessary for comprehensive primary care and specialty care practice in a variety of settings. The curriculum is designed to prepare the nurse practitioner to qualify for the certification exam in their anticipated area of practice.

## Practice Setting

Nurse practitioners collaborate with a physician on patient care while working in a variety of different practice settings.

- Community Health Centers
- Public Health Departments
- Hospitals and Hospital Clinics
- School and College Student Health Clinics
- Business and Industry Employee Health Settings

- Physician Offices
- Nurse Practitioners Offices
- Health Maintenance Organizations
- Nursing Homes, Hospices, and Home Health Care
- Emergency and Urgent Care Settings
- Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Facilities
- Faculty at Schools of Nursing

## Credentials

To be licensed, nurse practitioners pass a national certification examination, which enables them to practice in any state in the United States. In South Dakota, nurse practitioners are licensed by both the Board of Nursing and the Board of Medical and Osteopathic Examiners.

## For More Information

For more information on a complete listing of nurse practitioner programs, call or write:

American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP)  
PO Box 12846  
Austin, TX 78711  
512-442-4262 ext. 6595  
E-mail: [admin@aanp.org](mailto:admin@aanp.org)  
[www.aanp.org](http://www.aanp.org) (Education/Research site)

South Dakota State University (SDSU) College of Nursing Graduate Department offers a Master of Science degree with a major in Nursing; students may choose from family nurse practitioner, neonatal nurse practitioner, or psychiatric nurse practitioner. For more information, call or write:

**South Dakota State University**  
Department of Graduate Nursing  
Attn: FNP Program  
Box 2275  
Brookings, SD 57006  
800-952-3541  
E-mail: [SDSU\\_Admissions@sdstate.edu](mailto:SDSU_Admissions@sdstate.edu)