



CERTIFICATION STANDARD

THE VALUE OF THE PA-C®

The PA-C Credential: Who, What & Why

PAs are licensed health care professionals who practice medicine with the supervision of a physician. The team approach to medicine that develops out of the physician-PA relationship establishes a foundation for the shared responsibilities of patient care. PAs bring a comprehensive skill set to patient care and can conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel on preventative health care, assist in surgery and -- in almost all states -- write prescriptions.

Conferred by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), the Physician Assistant-Certified® (PA-C®) credential is required in all 50 states for initial licensure and in 19 states for licensure renewal. NCCPA offers the only nationally recognized certification program for PAs in the United States. Physicians, employ-

ers and third-party payers are also increasingly requiring PAs to maintain their NCCPA certification in addition to their state-issued license. Maintenance of the PA-C® credential represents a commitment to lifelong learning and evaluation of knowledge and skills applied across a broad spectrum of medical and surgical areas.

NCCPA's mission is to assure that certified physician assistants meet professional standards of knowledge and skills. The easiest way to check the certification status of a PA is to use the **Verify PA-C** function at *NCCPA Connect* (www.nccpa.net). By entering the PA's last name and state, you can find the current status and expiration date for any PA's certification. If more information is needed, a simple form on the same screen allows you to request the additional information.

PA Education & Initial Certification

PAs are educated in intensive didactic and clinical programs accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). To facilitate the close working relationship PAs have with their supervising physician, the profession trains students in the medical model, mirroring the training most medical students receive. Often PAs and medical students even attend classes together.

The average PA curriculum runs 26 months. Education focuses on classroom and laboratory instruction in the medical and behavioral sciences (such as anatomy, pharmacology, pathophysiology, clinical medicine and physical diagnosis), followed by rotations in internal medicine, family medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine and geriatric medicine.

Once PAs graduate from their PA program, they become eligible for NCCPA's initial certification exam, called the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE). New graduates must pass PANCE within six attempts and within six years of graduation.



PANCE is a computer-based exam that assesses a PA's general medical and surgical knowledge with 360 multiple-choice questions. The exam is administered 50 weeks a year at Prometric testing centers around the U.S.

More than 60,000 PAs have passed the initial certification exam since it was first administered in the mid-1970s. Today, more than 50,000 certified PAs practice in almost every setting and medical and surgical specialty (see *Table 2*, inside). The PA population continues to grow steadily as each year around 5,000 new PAs graduate and take PANCE.

Commitment to Lifelong Learning & Assessment

To maintain NCCPA certification, PAs must complete a two-pronged process that requires both ongoing education and evaluation. **Every two years PAs are required to log 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME), including at least 50 Category I hours.**

The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) approves both live presentations and enduring material programs for Category I CME credit. AAPA also stipulates the following as Category I (pre-approved) CME credit for physician assistants: programs that are approved by the American Osteopathic Association Council on Continuing Medical Education for Category I credit, Prescribed Credit by the American Academy of Family Physicians, or American Medical Association Category I CME for the Physician's Recognition Award from organizations accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education.

In addition to earning CME, PAs are also required to pass a recertification exam once during every six-year certification maintenance cycle. NCCPA offers the computer-based Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam (PANRE) and -- for PAs who can document sufficient additional continuing education, research or other training above the requirements for certification maintenance --

a take-at-home exam called the Pathway II. Both exams include 300 multiple-choice questions designed to assess PAs medical and surgical knowledge.

Despite the relatively rigorous certification maintenance and recertification requirements, the vast majority of the members of this conscientious profession maintains certification throughout their careers. In 2003, for example, 98% of PAs met the requirements to maintain continuous certification.

How Do PAs Earn CME?

Self-Directed Study	44%
Lecture/Learner Programs	38%
Certificate Courses	14%
Interactive (Hands On) Training	4%
	100%

Table 1: PAs earn CME through a variety of formats as reported by certified PAs who logged their CME online at NCCPA's Web site, 2003-2004.

Certified PAs Practice in Every Medical Specialty

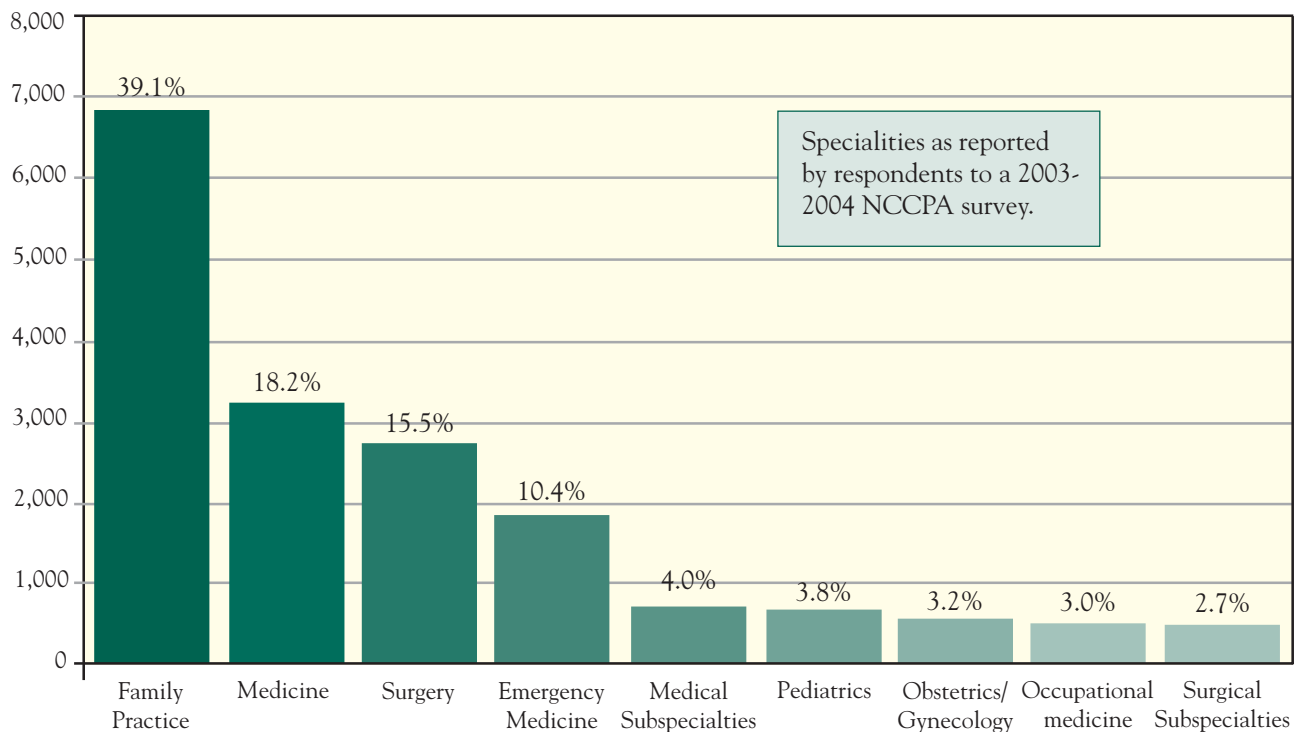


Table 2



Exam Developed to Meet Rigorous Expectations

Examination Content Blueprint

Organ Systems & Practice Areas

% of Exam Content	Diseases, Disorders & Medical Assessments of the:
16	Cardiovascular System
12	Pulmonary System
10	Gastrointestinal System/Nutrition
10	Musculoskeletal System
9	Eyes, Ears, Nose & Throat
8	Reproductive System
6	Endocrine System
6	Neurologic System
6	Psychiatry/Behavioral Science
6	Genitourinary System
5	Dermatologic System
3	Hematologic System
3	Infectious Diseases
100%	

Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

% of Exam Content	Knowledge & Skill Areas
16	History Taking & Performing Physical Exams
14	Using Lab & Diagnostic Studies
18	Formulating Most Likely Diagnosis
14	Clinical Intervention
18	Clinical Therapeutics
10	Health Maintenance
10	Applying Scientific Concepts
100%	

The test development process employed for the PA certification and recertification exams adheres to strict guidelines designed to ensure the validity and reliability of the exams.

NCCPA's certification and recertification exams are constructed based on an examination content blueprint (at left) that specifies the organ systems and practice areas and knowledge, skills, and abilities that are tested on the exam. The content blueprint is validated every five to seven years by a practice analysis, an intensive three-step research process through which the day-to-day activities of PAs and the knowledge and skills needed to execute those activities are identified and classified by their degree of importance. Based on the outcome of that analysis, the content blueprint is revised to reflect the evolution of medicine, surgery and PA practice, thereby ensuring that PAs are always being tested on what they need to know to fulfill their role in the health care delivery team.

Test committees made up of PAs and physicians write the test questions for NCCPA's exams under the direction of experts at the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME). Each question is edited for style and clarity by NBME's test-writing experts, reviewed by the test writing committee and then pre-tested on an actual NCCPA examination. During the pre-testing, statistical analyses are conducted to determine the validity and difficulty of each new question. The question becomes a scored item only after it proves to be both valid and relevant.

Items are continually reviewed, and outdated or overexposed questions are removed from the examinations.

If you are interested in serving as a physician member of an NCCPA test writing committee, contact NCCPA at 678.417.8100.



Table 3

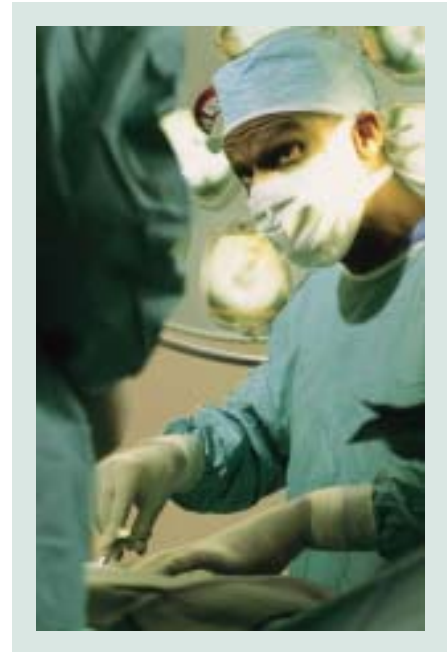


Setting the Standard for PA Practice

Maintaining certification represents both a commitment to lifelong learning and – since the PA-C® is the only professional designation for physician assistants – a commitment to enhancing the integrity of the credential and the PA profession.

To that end, great clinicians are more than knowledgeable, skilled health care providers; they're also professional, ethical people who incorporate those values into the work that they do every day. In addition to CME and recertification requirements, here are a few other ways NCCPA holds certified PAs to appropriate professional standards:

- ✓ **CME audits:** To ensure the accuracy of CME logging submissions, NCCPA randomly selects PAs for auditing, requiring them to provide supporting documentation for all of their Category I CME hours. For the 2001-2003 cycle, 95% of audited PAs successfully provided all required documentation to substantiate their Category I CME submissions.
- ✓ **Rigorous exam security:** NCCPA's computer-based examinations are administered through Prometric testing centers where PAs take their examinations in a tightly controlled environment. Also, NCCPA reviews examination results for indications that irregular behavior may have occurred.



- ✓ **Review of disciplinary issues:** Another way that NCCPA holds certifying and certified PAs to high standards of professional and ethical conduct is through a disciplinary policy that provides consequences for cheating on exams, falsifying certification records, revocation or suspension of a medical license, felony convictions, mental incompetence and documented gross or unethical conduct.

Our Mission

NCCPA assures that certified physician assistants meet professional standards of knowledge and skills.

Our Board of Directors

NCCPA's Board of Directors includes public and PA directors at large, as well as appointees from these participating organizations:

- American Academy of Family Physicians
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Academy of Physician Assistants
- American College of Emergency Physicians
- American College of Physicians
- American College of Surgeons
- American Hospital Association
- American Medical Association
- American Osteopathic Association
- Association of American Medical Colleges
- Association of Physician Assistant Programs
- Federation of State Medical Boards
- U.S. Department of Defense
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

In response to reports questioning the quality of available medical care and growing interest in competence assessment within the medical and surgical professions, NCCPA and other PA constituent organizations – AAPA, ARC-PA and the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP) – have undertaken a cooperative effort to establish a shared, profession-wide definition of PA competencies. This project takes a holistic view of PA practice and recognizes the breadth of competencies associated with medical practice. As this project evolves, NCCPA and the PA profession are drawing largely on the guidelines for professionalism and assessment developed for physician organizations. The ultimate goal is to identify and enact new ways to develop PA competencies, assess those competencies and offer remediation to PAs who don't meet established standards.

For more information on certified physician assistants, contact NCCPA at: 12000 Findley Road, Suite 200 • Duluth, GA 30097
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