

Issue Brief

Physician Assistants in Hospital Practice: Credentialing and Privileging

PAs are licensed professionals who practice medicine with physician supervision. Typical duties, depending on specialty, include evaluating and treating patients in the ER; performing histories and physicals; admitting patients on behalf of physicians; providing surgical first assistant coverage for the daily and emergency operating schedules; conducting daily patient rounds; evaluating changes in patients' conditions; issuing orders for medications, treatments, and laboratory tests; and writing discharge summaries. PAs working with specialist and subspecialist physicians often have very specialized privileges particular to that field. Many hospitals hire PAs to function as house staff for surgical or medical departments, in emergency departments, or in intensive care units.

Physician assistants who practice in hospitals are diverse and highly skilled professionals who are found in virtually every department, working with physicians of every medical and surgical specialty. They may be employed by the hospital (or system) or by medical practices or other outside organizations. Nearly 20,000 (40 percent) of the 50,000 clinically practicing PAs are employed by or work primarily in hospital settings.

Although PAs can be found working almost anywhere in a hospital, primarily they practice in emergency departments (25%), operating rooms (23%), outpatient units (20%), critical care or intensive care units (4%), and other inpatient units (18%).

The level of physician supervision required is defined in state law and in hospital policy. All state laws allow the flexibility of off-site supervision by physicians as long as they are available to the PA via telecommunication. In developing their supervision policies, most hospitals choose to follow state law; however, they do have the option of being more stringent (but not less) than the requirements of law. (Federally employed PAs are governed by federal agency guidelines, rather than state law.)

Privileging Physician Assistants

To provide patient care in the hospital, PAs and their supervising physicians must seek delineation of their clinical privileges. The criteria for granting clinical privileges to PAs should be outlined in the medical staff bylaws. The bylaws should include a definition of physician assistant, generally conforming to the definition used in state law and to the general definition of a PA used by the American Academy of Physician Assistants. An example might be as follows:

A physician assistant (PA) is an individual who is a graduate of a physician assistant program accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant or by one of its predecessor agencies (the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation or the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs); and/or who is certified by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants; and who is licensed, registered, or certified to practice medicine with physician supervision.



Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) medical staff standards, that took effect in January 2004, require hospitals to credential and privilege PAs through the medical staff or by another “equivalent process.” Prior to January 2004, hospitals had the option of credentialing PAs through the human resources department and allowing them to practice with only a job description, rather than privileges.

Bylaws should stipulate that all clinical privileges granted to PAs be consistent with all applicable state laws and regulations and that a PA may provide medical services that are within the scope of practice of the supervising physician. More detailed information about amending hospital bylaws is available at www.aapa.org/policy/hospital-staff-bylaws.html.

Credentialing Physician Assistants

Hospitals that wish to grant privileges to a PA should verify that the individual is properly licensed, certified, or registered by the state and has adequate liability insurance. Credentials verification should include queries of the National Practitioner Data Bank (NPDB) for malpractice information and the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) for records of disciplinary actions taken against the PA.

The American Medical Association’s (AMA) Physician Profile Service also offers PA credentials verification. For a nominal fee, credentialing professionals can confirm a PA’s education program attendance and graduation date, national certification number and status, current and historical state licensure information, and AAPA membership status. JCAHO has deemed that the education information and national certification data are equivalent to primary source information.

To credential PAs, many hospitals adapt their physician forms and criteria to create a parallel process for PAs. The criteria usually are defined in the medical staff bylaws or in an associated policy and procedures manual. On demonstration of satisfactory training and experience, and after approval by the hospital board or designated

individual, a PA may be granted privileges with supervision of a physician(s) who has appropriate privileges.

Reappointment/Reprivileging

As with physicians, hospital bylaws should specify a time period for the renewal and revision of physician assistant privileges and reappointment to the medical staff.

The medical staff should evaluate information provided by physician supervisors and physician assistant peers on the PA’s professional performance, including technical and clinical skills. They also should evaluate information on performance improvement, including continuing medical education and other courses completed. The PA’s scope of practice should be updated as changes in clinical privileges are made. Queries to the NPDB and FSMB should be made any time privileges are renewed, revised, or expanded.

Hospital-based or Hospital-employed PAs: Where They Practice

Setting	%	Number
Emergency room	25%	5,000
Operating room	23%	4,600
Outpatient unit	19%	3,800
Other inpatient unit	19%	3,800
Critical care unit	4%	800
Other unit of the hospital	3%	600
Federally qualified rural health clinic	1%	200
Other federally qualified health center	1%	200
Other outpatient facility	1%	200
Other areas of the hospital	4%	800
Total	100%	20,000

Source: 2003 AAPA Physician Assistant Census Report

Medical Staff Membership

Medical staff bylaws identify the categories of providers eligible for membership. AAPA believes that PAs should be members of the medical staff because they provide medical care. While their authority to provide care is delegated by a supervising physician, PAs exercise a high level of decision making and autonomy in day-to-day practice. The AAPA recommends that medical staffs credential and privilege all PAs and include them as members, with all of the committee involvement, quality measures, and peer review that are part of medical staff oversight. Both Joint Commission standards and Medicare and Medicaid Conditions of Participation for Hospitals allow PA membership on medical staffs. State law should be consulted; some state laws define which professionals can be medical staff members.

Additional Resources

AAPA's publication, *Physician Assistants and Hospital Practice*, offers a sample application for PA clinical privileges and detailed information about hospital bylaws, PAs and EMTALA, relevant Joint Commission standards, and more. The publication, providing nuts-and-bolts tools to ease the process of credentialing and privileging PAs, is available to AAPA members for \$25 and to nonmembers for \$50. Copies may be ordered on-line at www.aapa.org/aapastore or by calling 703/787-8044.

Information that may be gathered for credentialing and privileging of physician assistants

Address (work and home)

Telephone (work and home)

Primary practice location

Other practice locations

Name(s) of supervising physician(s)

Practice specialty(ies)

Social Security number

License or registration number

NCCPA certification

State prescribing number

DEA number

Medicare Provider Identification Number

Degrees and certificates

- From PA program
- From other educational programs or institutions
- PA postgraduate training

Additional training (e.g., advanced cardiac life support, advanced trauma life support)

Chronological professional experience, including names, addresses, and phone numbers of previous employers

Professional affiliations

Teaching appointments

Precepting and mentoring experience

Past and current privileges

Legal and administrative actions taken against an individual

- By employers, hospitals, and other institutions
- By government agencies
- By professional societies
- By other monitors of professional conduct

Professional liability

- Current liability coverage
- Other carriers from the past "x" years
- Past and current claims and suits
- National Practitioner Data Bank

Personal health *

References

* The exact questions may vary depending on applicable legal requirements such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.



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The following publications are available from the AAPA store.

Order on-line at www.aapa.org/aapastore, or call 703/787-8044.

Hiring a Physician Assistant

This publication includes information about education requirements for physician assistants, guidelines regarding their scope of responsibilities and practice, and a pre-employment checklist. The book also covers topics such as state regulations, national certification, malpractice coverage, employment agreements, recruiting, and compensation. (68 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00

Physician Assistant Third-Party Coverage

This resource summarizes third-party coverage policies for PA medical and surgical services, and outlines rules, regulations, and billing concepts for coverage of physician services provided by PAs under Medicare, Medicaid, TRICARE/CHAMPUS, and private insurance companies. Practice issues such as strategies for handling claim denials are also covered. This book provides the physician assistant with insight into courses of action that can be taken to help solve problems and maintain a more positive reimbursement environment. (100 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00

Physician Assistants and Hospital Practice

This publication is a summary of information on the practice of PAs in hospitals. It contains policy statements from national organizations, information about JCAHO, patient restraints, EMTALA, model hospital bylaws, and a sample credentialing form. (74 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00

Contacts & Contracts: An Employment Guide for PAs

This comprehensive manual helps both new graduates and experienced PAs identify and secure the perfect job. It includes information about job opportunities, employment recruiters, resume and cover-letter writing, the interview process, and contract negotiation. Handy checklists for pre-employment issues, contract negotiations, and resigning procedures are also featured. (108 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00

Physician Assistants: State Laws and Regulations

This publication is a detailed resource of state laws and regulations related to the PA profession, including a state-by-state summary of statutes and regulations, with information on scope of practice, prescribing and dispensing, qualifications for practice, and the definition of supervision. It contains summaries of more than two dozen key provisions of each state's statute and regulations complete with legal citations. (9th ed., 300 pages)

Members \$50.00 Nonmembers \$100.00

Annotated Bibliography of the PA Profession

An annotated bibliography containing concise summaries of studies, books, reports, and medical journal articles on the PA profession published between 1986 and 1993. (4th ed., 281 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00

Addendum to the Annotated Bibliography, 1993-1999

Companion to the Annotated Bibliography. Contains descriptions of the most recent books, journal articles, studies, and reports on PAs. Categorized by practice setting, specialty, and other topics. (200 ed., 92 pages)

Members \$25.00 Nonmembers \$50.00



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