



Bridging the Gap

expanding physician assistants in new brunswick

INTRODUCTION

The following document has been prepared by the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants (CAPA) as part of the 2020-2021 Pre-Budget Consultation Process and in response to the New Brunswick Government's [pre-consultation document](#).

Our submission and recommendations will focus on addressing the following questions posed by the Government:

1. What are the most important issues when it comes to providing dependable public health care?
2. What opportunities exist to improve the value for money in the delivery of government services?

We believe that the most critical issue affecting the sustainability of dependable public health care is New Brunswick's pervasive and growing shortage of medical professionals. Adding to this crisis is the uneven and inequitable distribution of physicians and other health care workers, which is most acutely felt in rural communities.

Without timely action, this shortfall will continue to negatively impact access to care and health outcomes, while costing the province more to inefficiently deliver services.

Expansion of the physician assistant (PA) model will help to bridge the gaps in care and improve the value for money in delivering health care. PAs represent a hugely untapped resource that can help the Government provide high levels of service while reducing overall costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CAPA is strongly recommending that the province invest in hiring more PAs and deploying them to priority areas within the health system. We understand the fiscal reality of the province, and know that an investment in PAs today will drive efficiencies, save money, support patients, and further the shift to team-based care.

Specifically, we call on the Government to:

1. Provide health authorities with funding earmarked to hire an additional 30 PAs over the next three years, at a cost of approximately \$3.6 million.
2. Expand the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick's regulation of PAs to allow PAs to work in all clinical settings and beyond the direct employment of a regional health authority.
3. Work with physicians, health system leaders, and municipalities to identify the clinical settings and communities where PAs should be deployed to have the greatest impact on patient access to care.

EVIDENCE

A recent recommendation report published by the Conference Board of Canada indicates that:

“As physician extenders, PAs play a vital role in improving patient outcomes and reducing overall system costs. To capitalize on this potential, Canada needs to implement strategic policy and funding changes to the way that health human resources and health services are currently provided and delivered.”

While PAs are never a replacement for physicians, Canadian and global evidence is clear that they do help physicians manage more patients and improve outcomes. Just as important to government—it costs significantly less to hire a PA.

In its series of four reports, the Conference Board examined PA productivity, cost-effectiveness, and funding models. It also delivered a series of recommendations on how governments can tap into PAs to deliver high levels of service while reducing costs. Notably, the [“Gaining Efficiency”](#) report outlines cost savings that could be generated in primary care and emergency care, where PAs can be a cost-effective substitute for certain designated medical tasks.

- [Value of Physician Assistants: Understanding the Role of Physician Assistants Within Health Systems](#)
- [Funding Models for Physician Assistants: Canadian and International Experiences](#)
- [Gaining Efficiency: Increasing the Use of Physician Assistants in Canada](#)
- [Value of Physician Assistants: Recommendations for Action](#)

EXPANDING PAs TO TACKLE NEW BRUNSWICK'S HEALTH CARE CHALLENGES

A snapshot of current challenges in the province include:

- 35,000 residents on a waiting list for a family doctor or nurse practitioner ([Source](#))
- ER wait times rising for the third straight quarter in Horizon Health Network hospitals (Source: “Exclusive: ER wait times getting worse”, 10 February 2020, *Telegraph Journal*)
- New Brunswickers receiving knee replacement surgery within the recommended six month wait time continues to drop ([Source](#))

- Rising rates of patients leaving the ER after waiting for hours without seeing a doctor ([Source](#))

How PAs can help tackle these challenges:

Emergency Rooms

Emergency medicine PAs are widely considered essential to improving patient flow, lowering wait times, and boosting physician morale and productivity. The addition of PAs can help lower initial practitioner assessment time and reduce the percentage of walk-ins leaving unseen by a doctor.

In rural Gimli, Manitoba (population: 2,000+) a PA makes it possible to keep the ER doors open, even when physicians are not on site. Doctors are always available to consult electronically, but PAs are trained to perform procedures like wound care, casting, or abscess incision and to begin stabilizing more urgent cases.

Primary Care

Team-based care involving PAs is associated [with a higher practice capacity for family doctors, allowing them to see more patients and provide a broader scope of services.](#)

In Ontario, primary care clinics use PAs to help stabilize patient access. The PA addition creates same-day acute episodic appointments that result in a “walk-in” type of environment (within 24 hours). In many practices, a primary care PA develops a niche in certain types of appointments which ultimately frees up doctors to see more complex patients.

Wait Times for Hip and Knee Surgeries

Demands on an already stretched surgical workforce are growing, but [the evidence shows](#) that adding PAs to orthopaedic surgical teams makes a big difference. The PA addition allowed a single surgeon to run two operating rooms during a single operating day and increase the volume of surgeries from three to seven surgeries per day.

With more PAs providing end-to-end support to surgical teams, tasks like post-operative evaluations, discharge planning, patient referrals, follow-up visits, and even prescription refills would be more efficient.

Demand for Hospitalists

With growing numbers of Alternative Level of Care patients admitted to hospital beds, the demand for hospitalists is growing. PAs are ideally suited to help manage patients who may not require complex hospital care, while also assisting in covering areas like internal medicine wards etc.

ABOUT PAs

PAs are advanced practice professionals who are educated in the medical model, similar to how physicians are educated. They provide primary, acute, and specialty care in all types of settings from emergency rooms and surgical suites to long-term care homes and primary care clinics. Working autonomously under the supervision of a physician, they assess patients, order and interpret tests, make diagnoses, provide treatment, serve as first assist in surgery, and much more.

In an era of limited resources, PAs are quite simply a “must-have” for our health system. For more detail on the education and certification of PAs, as well as their scope and standards of practice, [please see our detailed Information Brief](#).

PAs IN NEW BRUNSWICK

In New Brunswick, PAs are regulated under the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick. Since their introduction, three PAs have been working in the ER at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital to improve patient flow, help address quality benchmarks, help doctors focus on the most acute patients, and save money.

ABOUT CAPA

CAPA is the national professional association representing physician assistants (PAs) in New Brunswick and across the country. We are the national voice of PAs and work to support quality standards and competencies, and help establish the profession within the national health care framework. Learn more: capa-acam.ca.

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