



## ISSUE BRIEF: PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

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### 1.0 ABOUT PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS (PAs) IN CANADA

A PA is an advanced practice clinician who is educated in the medical school model and practices medicine autonomously under the direct supervision of a licensed physician, often within a multidisciplinary health team.

PAs possess a defined body of knowledge and a professional philosophy for effective patient care. They apply these clinical competencies to collect data and interpret information, develop and investigate differential diagnoses, make appropriate clinical decisions, and carry out required diagnostic, procedural and therapeutic interventions.

These highly skilled health professionals can work in any clinical setting to extend a doctor's reach, complement existing services, and help improve patient access to care. A few examples of their key functions include:

- conducting patient interviews and taking medical histories
- conducting physical exams
- ordering and interpreting tests
- prescribing medications
- formulating treatment plans
- providing patient counseling and preventative health care
- assisting in surgery; and
- performing other tasks within the supervising physician's scope of practice that the physician deems the PA qualified to complete.

Across Canada PAs have become "must-haves" in primary care, long-term care, emergency medicine, cancer care, general internal medicine, and surgical specialties like orthopaedic surgery and neurosurgery.

### 2.0 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

#### Canada

In Canada there are four accredited PA education programs which meet national standards of education, including a defined set of competencies that are outlined in the profession's National Competency Profile (CanMEDS-PA). The programs are:

- University of Manitoba Masters of Physician Assistant Studies
- McMaster University Physician Assistant Education Program
- The Consortium of PA Education (University of Toronto in collaboration with the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and the Michener Institute at UHN).
- Canadian Armed Forces Health Services Training Centre Physician Assistant Program

All the civilian education programs are delivered in partnership with the faculties of medicine at Canadian universities. By aligning PA education with the medical model, it lays the foundation for a collaborative working relationship with physicians.

The intensive PA program extends over 24 months and begins with classroom instruction in basic medical sciences. This is followed by physician-directed rotations with multidisciplinary teams in medical and surgical disciplines. The students participate in clinical training in areas that can include trauma, anesthesia, general surgery, sports medicine, orthopaedics, internal medicine, emergency medicine, paediatrics and family medicine. See Table 1 for links to more information on each program.

**Table 1: PA Education Programs in Canada**

Institution	Degree	Admission Requirements	Curriculum
McMaster University Physician Assistant Education Program	Bachelor of Health Sciences Degree (Physician Assistant)	Applicants must have completed a minimum of two years of undergraduate work and only degree courses at an accredited university will be considered. Applicants are expected to have achieved an overall simple average of at least 3.0 on the Ontario Medical School Application Service scale for consideration. <a href="#">Complete details.</a>	A 24-month program – year one focuses on clinical sciences and year two involves 48 weeks of supervised clinical placements.  See also: <a href="#">Curriculum Information</a>
The Consortium of PA Education (University of Toronto in collaboration with the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and Michener Institute for Applied Health Sciences)	Bachelor of Science Physician Assistant Degree	Admission requirements include a minimum of 10 full-year courses or the equivalent of four semesters full time of undergraduate university education from a recognized university. <a href="#">Complete details</a>	<a href="#">A 24-month program</a> – year one focuses on clinical sciences and year two involves 40 weeks of supervised clinical placements, with specific experience in rural Ontario settings.  See also:

Institution	Degree	Admission Requirements	Curriculum
			<a href="#">Program Overview</a>  <a href="#">Course Information</a> (including course descriptions)
University of Manitoba	Masters of Physician Assistant Studies	<a href="#">Complete details</a> – requires a four year Bachelor’s degree and requires undergraduate courses in anatomy, physiology and biochemistry	A 24-month program including an academic first year followed by 13 months of clinical rotations in various medical and surgical environments, with one quarter of clinical education in rural environments.  See:  <a href="#">Educational philosophy and curriculum</a>
Canadian Armed Forces Health Services Training Centre Physician Assistant Program	Physician Assistant Baccalaureate in Allied Health Program.	Graded entry based on prior learning will be available for candidates with advanced standing or experience such as other allied health professionals, or paramedics. Qualification Level 6 Medical Technician qualification; rank of Sergeant; and successful completion of the Junior Leadership Course or Professional Level. Qualifications (12-15 years of service). In addition, candidate must be merit listed for promotion to Warrant Officer.  <a href="#">Requirements</a>	

## A Closer Look at Canadian PA Programs

It's important to note that the qualifications described in Table 1 represent the minimum requirements, and the vast majority of successful candidates exceed these minimum requirements.

*Example: McMaster University Class of 2021*

There were more than 730 applicants for 24 spots in McMaster's PA program. Of the 72 applicants selected for an interview:

- the GPA average is 3.82 (for comparison, McMaster's Medical School class of 2021 GPA average is 3.87)
- 70 / 72 (applicants (97%) completed a Bachelor's degree (including two IMGs and 10 applicants with Masters or PhD degrees and the remaining two candidates are degrees in progress)
- the average age is 25.

*McMaster University – The Past 10 Years*

- 5,230 applications for 261 spaces (for comparison, there are ~5,000 applicants / year for 206 spaces at McMaster's Medical School)
- Class size is between 20-24 students per year
- Of the accepted students
  - 70% had GPA >3.5 (the minimum is 3.0 to 3.49)
  - 67% have a four-year Bachelor degree
  - 20% have a Master's degree
  - Graduation completing rate is 96.7%
  - Attrition rate is 3.5%

## 3.0 CERTIFICATION AND MAINTENANCE OF CERTIFICATION

### Certification

Graduates of accredited Canadian PA programs are eligible to write the Physician Assistant Certification Council of Canada (PACCC) PA Certification Exam entry to practice exam. Individuals who successfully pass the exam are awarded the Canadian Certified Physician Assistant (CCPA) designation.

*Additional information:*

- [About the Physician Assistant Certification Council of Canada \(PACCC\)](#)
- [Policy and Procedure to Challenge the PACCC Physician Assistant Entry to Practice Examination \(PA Cert Exam\)](#)
- [PACCC Pass Standard Setting Method](#) (Angoff Method)

## Maintenance of Certification

Like other health professionals, after graduation PAs continue learning in the clinical work environment and through continuing professional development (CPD). A PA's scope of practice grows and shifts over time with advanced or specialized knowledge, with changes or advances in the medical profession overall, or with changes in the PA's practice setting or specialty.

Importantly, the PACCC maintains a strict policy regarding the maintenance of certification that involves partnering with the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada for use of the Mainport ePortfolio.

### *CPD Requirements*

All certified PAs must annually renew their CAPA membership and earn and report at least:

- **400 credits** over the course of a five-year cycle by participating in educational activities that meet the identified needs of your professional practice.
- **40 credits per year**, even in the years after you have reached the 400-credit minimum requirement.

Credits are documented using the MAINPORT ePortfolio, the CPD reporting tool for the RCPSC maintenance of competency program.

### *Additional information:*

- [Overview: PACCC Continuing Professional Development Policy](#)
- [Full Policy: PACCC Continuing Professional Development Policy](#)
- [RCPSC Framework of Continuing Professional Development Activities](#)

## 4.0 SCOPE AND STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

### Scope of Practice

A PA scope of practice is physician-delegated and the medical services assigned to the PA must be within the scope of the supervising physician. In Canada, their degree of autonomy will vary in each provincial jurisdiction where they practice.

Prior to assigning clinical work, supervising physicians must consider:

- the best interest of the patient ☒
- the competence of the PA to safely complete the task ☒
- the amount of supervision the PA should have in completing the task, and how that supervision will be provided ☒
- the organization's policies and procedures.

Each PA and their supervising physician(s) will establish a practice agreement that documents the types of clinical work the PA will perform in that practice setting, how that work will be assigned and the type of supervision they will receive when performing that work.

#### *Example — Documenting Scope of Practice Through Regulation*

Where PAs are regulated through a College of Physicians and Surgeons, in Manitoba for example, an application for regulation must include:

*“A practice description that sets out detailed information about the medical services the PA will provide, the type of supervision to be provided by the supervising physician, and the practice location where the services will be provided. The description must be signed by the supervising physician and be in a form acceptable to the registrar.*

*The practice description is subject to the approval of the council the CPSM.”*

#### **Standard of Practice**

CanMEDS-PA is a framework that describes the abilities of PAs to meet the needs of the patients they serve.

It was developed with the support of the RCPSC and the College of Family Physicians of Canada to define how and under what circumstances PAs may exercise their competencies within the health care system. It also communicates a set of standards that all PAs are expected to acquire for entry to practice. The competencies that PAs acquire are grouped thematically into seven roles:

- Medical Expert
- Communicator
- Collaborator
- Leader
- Health Advocate
- Scholar
- Professional

CanMEDS-PA is a resource for PAs, supervising physicians, educators, legislators, and other health professionals.

#### *Important Links*

- [CanMEDS-PA \(2015 edition\)](#)

## **5.0 REGULATION: A CROSS-CANADA SCAN**

The manner in which PAs practice and how they are recognized and/or regulated varies across Canada. The approach in each jurisdiction is described below and Table 2 provides a summary, with links to legislation and documentation.

## **Manitoba**

PAs were regulated as clinical assistants between 1999 and 2009, and since 2009 have been regulated as PAs. The regulation provides for the registration of PAs on the PA Register maintained by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba. An application for registration must include a supervision contract between a licensed doctor and PA. It must also include a practice description that sets out the medical services to be provided, the location, and the type of supervision to be provided.

## **New Brunswick**

In 2009 the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick amended the New Brunswick Medical Act to include PAs in their health care model. Section 32.1 of the Act allows PAs to be licensed, provided they register with the CPSNB. In addition, Regulation 14 was created in January 2010 in order to dictate the terms of practice for PAs in the province and subsequently amended in 2014 when PAs were awarded prescriptive rights.

## **Alberta**

In 2010, the Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) passed bylaw 24(6), allowing PAs to operate under the responsibility of a regulated member. Accordingly, the CPSA created a new voluntary and non-regulated membership category for PA.

In the fall of 2020 the Alberta Government announced that PAs will be recognized as regulated health care professionals beginning April 1, 2021. The CPSA will be the regulatory body overseeing the profession.

## **Ontario**

PAs were introduced in Ontario in 2007 through a joint initiative between the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ontario Medical Association as a way to address doctor shortages. The profession was initially launched via a demonstration project in order to evaluate the impact of PAs and today Ontario has the highest number of practicing PAs in Canada.

In Ontario, PAs operate under delegation, which authorizes the PA to perform specific tasks for the patient population of the supervising physician. The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) maintains a policy on the Delegation of Controlled Acts. In 2018, the Minister of Health instructed the CPSO to work with the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) to develop a proposal for consideration to provide direct oversight for PAs in Ontario which would include the development for a new class of members and registry upon which PAs should be enrolled. In October 2020, Ontario's Minister of Health, the Honourable Christine Elliott announced that Ontario will be moving forward with regulating PAs in the province

## **Nova Scotia**

In 2019, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, with the support of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, announced the introduction of PAs in orthopaedic surgery. The launch will begin as a pilot

program, with a view to permanently integrating PAs within Nova Scotia's health care system and establishing regulatory oversight.



**Table 2. Summary of PA Regulation**

Prov	Authority	Legislation or Bylaws	Registry	Other
MB	College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba	The Regulated Health Professions Act (C.C.S.M. c. R117) ( <a href="#">see p. 59 for PA details</a> )	<a href="#">PA Register Directory</a>	<a href="#">CPSM Continuing Professional Development Requirements</a>  <a href="#">CPSM Registration Requirements</a>
NB	College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick	<a href="#">New Brunswick Medical Act, Regulations and Guidelines — Regulation #6: Physician Assistants</a>  <a href="#">New Brunswick Medical Act, Physician Assistant Register</a> (see section 32.1)	<a href="#">List of Licensed PAs in New Brunswick</a>	
AB	College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta	<a href="#">CPSA Bylaw 24(6): Non-Regulated Members</a>	<a href="#">List of Registered PAs</a>	<a href="#">Definition of Restricted Activities in the <i>Government Organization Act</i></a> (Section 7.1, page 37)  <a href="#">CPSA Standard of Practice: Supervision of Restricted Activities</a>  <a href="#">Additional information on the CPSA website</a>
ON	College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario	N/A – PAs operate under delegation but are not regulated	N/A	<a href="#">Policy — Delegation of Controlled Acts</a>

## 6.0 PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY PROTECTION

Many PAs are responsible for securing their own professional liability coverage for their practice. Employers may require that liability insurance be in place as a condition of employment. Through CAPA, all certified PAs have access to coverage through Smith and Reid's Insurance, which is underwritten by Berkley's Canada.

### *Related Information*

The Canadian Medical Protective Association can provide further information about managing risks to practicing physicians. The CMPA also provides some guidance on its website:

- [Working with PAs: Collaborating while managing risks](#)

## 7.0 CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA REPORTS

A series of reports from the Conference Board of Canada also provides important evidence on how PAs can help alleviate demand and save money.

- [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](#)

Notably, the Conference Board states that hiring more PAs and properly integrating them on health care teams could save the Canadian health care system up to \$1 billion by the year 2030.