Career flexibility for physician associates/assistants: What makes switching specialties possible?

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INTRODUCTION

Background
- Physician associates/assistants (PAs) are uniquely able to change specialties1
- Flexibility is important to both practicing PAs and those considering this career path2
- Switching specialties is common2 and will likely become more common as medicine becomes more specialized and new generations change jobs more frequently
- Despite this, little is known about the process of switching specialties

Research Questions:
- What are the barriers and facilitators of PAs switching specialties?
- What are the experiences in starting in a new specialty as an experienced PA?

METHODS

We recruited from two overlapping populations:
1) Advanced Practice Provider (APP) leaders who hire PAs
2) Experienced PAs who have switched specialties

- Recruitment occurred from March to July 2022 via listservs at Stanford Health Care
- Semi-structured interviews focused on experiences in hiring, onboarding, job search and starting a new role
- Data was analyzed thematically

RESULTS

- 15 participants: 8 PAs, 7 APP leaders (4 were also PAs who had switched specialties)
- 23 transitions from one specialty to another were described by interviewees

Hiring decisions were shaped by an array of factors

Factors shaping hiring decisions
- Pre-existing relationships between hiring managers and candidates
- Hiring managers’ predictions about retention of potential new hires
- Specific characteristics of candidates other than prior specialty experience (e.g., personality match with surgeon, acuity experience, prior level of autonomy)
- Manager or team bandwidth for training
- Individual hiring managers’ preference for ‘clean slate’ candidates who don’t have established practices that may need to change
- Candidate pool (e.g., did people with specialty experience applied for the role?)

Experiences of starting a new role
- PAs transition from being experienced and competent to being expected to treat conditions they have never seen before in new settings with new processes
- Hiring managers do not often consider the unique needs or strengths of this population
- Training is frequently insufficient
- Both PAs and hiring managers expressed being surprised at some of these challenges
- Eventually both PAs and APP leaders were satisfied with the outcomes

CONCLUSION

PAs hoping to switch specialties should:
- Build and leverage a professional network
- Identify areas where they can highlight relevant experience
- Demonstrate to hiring managers that they intend to stay in a new role

Hiring managers should:
- Consider how their hiring practices may lead to biased decisions
- Adjust expectations for new hires based on their specific backgrounds
- Leverage the unique experiences of PAs switching specialties

Limitations:
- Small sample size from a single academic medical center
- Hypothesis generating work only

Future research could test hypotheses on how to improve the experiences of PAs who switch specialties.

References: