

# 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 specialties<sup>1</sup>
- Flexibility is important to both practicing PAs and those considering this career path<sup>2</sup>
- Switching specialties is common<sup>2</sup> 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

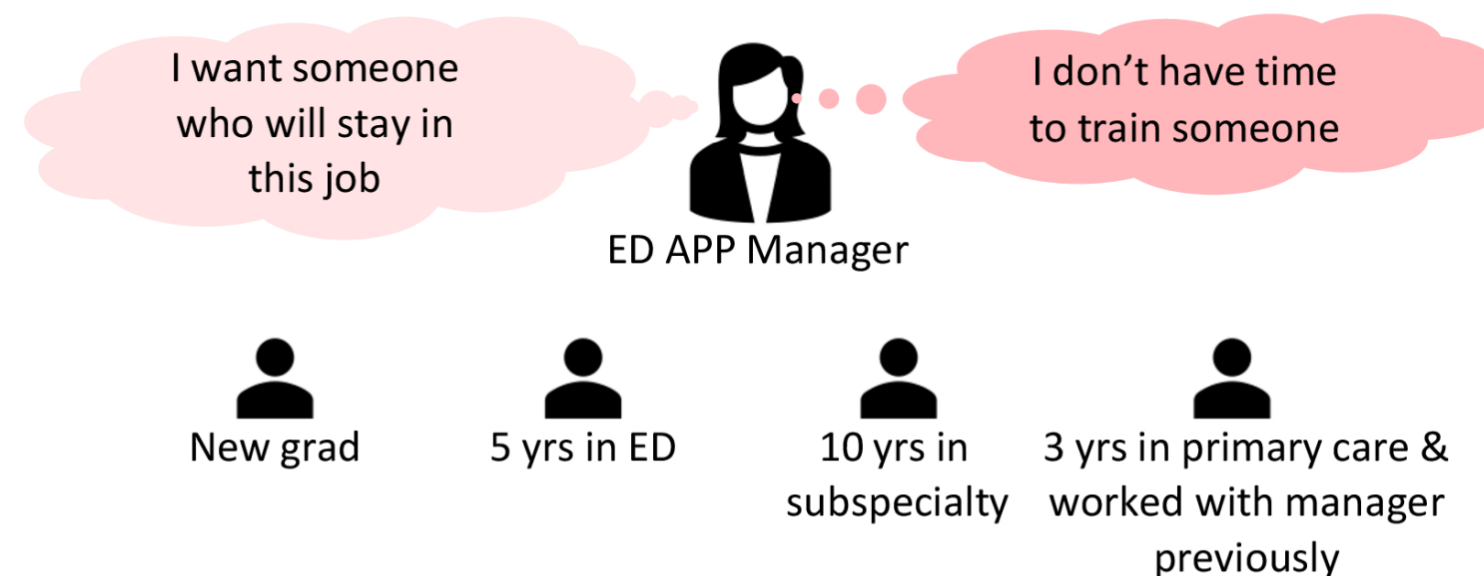
We recruited from two overlapping populations:

- 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:

1. Essary AC, Bernard KS, Coplan B, et al. Burnout and Job and Career Satisfaction in the Physician Assistant Profession: A Review of the Literature. *NAM Perspect*. Published online December 3, 2018. doi:10.31478/201812b
2. Warner M, Maio C, Hudmon KS. Career patterns of physician assistants: A retrospective longitudinal study. *J Am Acad Physician Assist*. 2013;26(6):44-48.