



AAPA Statement for the Record
Submitted to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health
In response to the Oversight Hearing: "VA's Federal Supremacy Initiative: Putting Veterans First?"

September 20, 2023

Dear Chair Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the subcommittee:

On behalf of the more than 168,000 physician associates/assistants (PAs) throughout the United States, the American Academy of Physician Associates (AAPA) thanks the committee for its commitment to ensuring our nation's veterans have the access they need to high quality medical care. AAPA appreciates the opportunity to engage with the subcommittee on the Department of Veterans' Affairs ongoing activity to develop national standards of practice at the VA, including our participation in the roundtable discussion on April 26.

The PA profession proudly maintains a close connection to the VA, as the very first PA students in 1965 were veterans. These first PA students were former Navy hospital corpsmen and Army combat medics who returned from the Vietnam war with considerable medical training from their military service. The VA was the first employer of PAs in 1967 and today is the largest single employer of PAs in the nation. Eleven percent of all practicing PAs and 24 percent of PAs employed by the VA are veterans, active-duty military, or serve in the National Guard and Reserves. PAs maintain a strong, personal desire and dedication to serve veterans.

PAs are highly educated professionals. Today's PA students average 3,000 hours of direct patient contact experience before acceptance into one of the more than 300 PA programs across the nation. The PA school curriculum is modeled on the medical school curriculum and includes both didactic and clinical education training over 27 months, or three academic years. PA students are educated in basic medical sciences, behavioral sciences, and behavioral ethics and complete more than 2,000 hours of clinical rotations in medical and surgical disciplines, including family medicine, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics, general surgery, emergency medicine, and psychiatry.

PAs practice in all medical and surgical specialties in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, as well as the uniformed services. PAs provide high-quality, cost-effective medical care in virtually all health settings. PAs undertake rigorous education and clinical training and are established as fully qualified and prepared to manage the treatment of patients who present with physical and/or mental illnesses. PAs are educated and equipped as active members of a healthcare team while managing the full scope of patient care. Further, PAs routinely treat patients with complex diagnoses or multiple comorbidities, including the unique healthcare situations that impact the nation's military and veteran populations.

PAs recognize that patient-centered care is paramount to successful health outcomes and AAPA supports the consideration of all evidence-based, truthful, information in the VA's development of practice standards for health professions included in this process. Our veterans deserve thoughtful and honest leadership in all aspects of healthcare delivery. AAPA has concerns with politically motivated rhetoric undercutting patient care. AAPA

encourages the VA and Congress to remove undue barriers that restrict the ability of providers, including PAs, to practice to the full extent of their education and experience.

In rulemaking the VHA undertook in 2020, *Authority of VA Professionals to Practice Health Care*, the VA reiterated its regulatory authority to authorize healthcare professionals, including PAs, to practice to the full extent of their education, training, and experience. AAPA urges the VA to take the necessary steps within its authority to ensure the agency's PA workforce is in the best possible position to improve access to care, ensure the VA can meet its workforce needs, and ensure it is meeting its obligation to provide quality medical care to our nation's veterans. In 2019, the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission concluded in a report to Congress that *"PAs provide care that is substantially similar to physicians in terms of clinical quality outcomes and patient experience. PAs have also been shown to increase access to care, improve care coordination and decrease healthcare costs."*¹

The PA profession thrives in team-based practice. Like all healthcare professionals, PAs have a legal and ethical obligation to consult, refer, or transfer patients when their healthcare needs are outside the PA's level of expertise. Moreover, team-based care increases access for patients. Batson et.al., or what has been called the "Hattiesburg study," is a non-peer reviewed, limited review of a single provider organization in Mississippi that does not differentiate between PAs and other providers. The authors themselves classify their work as "really an observational experience"² and not a scientific study. Data is important in ensuring patients receive the best care possible, but the miscalculation and manipulation of poorly extrapolated findings to fit a political narrative is an indolent attempt to undercut patient care.

For decades, PAs employed by the VA have practiced medicine under federally established guidelines. The current PA utilization directive, which was issued in 2013, and was scheduled to receive a much-needed update in 2018, has yet to be updated. In 2020, the VA adopted the "Authority of VA Professionals to Practice Health Care" rule after the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the critical need to ensure that PAs and other healthcare providers can practice to the full extent of their education and training. During the COVID-19 pandemic, PAs played a major role in providing essential services -- including setting up emergency response centers, which streamlined care and increased access to healthcare for patients. AAPA has urged the VA to make use of the authority granted by the rule to adopt national standards of practice that grant full practice authority and licensed independent practitioner status to PAs within the VA healthcare system. AAPA urges the VA to create strong national standards of practice for the PA profession that will improve access to high quality healthcare for America's veterans.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Tate Heuer, AAPA Vice President, Federal Advocacy, at 571-319-4338 or at theuer@aapa.org.

¹ Medicare Payment Advisory Commission. Report to the Congress. Medicare and the Health Care Delivery System. June 2019. http://www.medpac.gov/docs/defaultsource/reports/jun19_medpac_reporttocongress_sec.pdf?sfvrsn=0

² <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/scope-practice/amid-doctor-shortage-nps-and-pas-seemed-fix-data-s-nope>