

Key Stakeholders Perspective of Optimal Team Practice in Arizona

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INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the Physician Assistant, or PA, profession in the 1960s, PAs have become an integral part of the healthcare team. A PA is 'a medical professional who is trained to diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, and often serve as the patient's primary provider. Restrictive barriers have limited PA practice, prompting the creation of the Optimal Team Practice (OTP) law. OTP focuses on promoting PA autonomy to improve access to care, especially to disparate populations, and enhance team-based care. Arizona recently became the fourth state to implement OTP and will serve as a case study for other states considering similar reforms.

- ❖ **Background Factors Driving the Movement for Optimal Team Practice (OTP):**
 - The COVID-19 Pandemic
 - Health Disparities and the Role of PAs
 - Addressing the Needs of an Aging Population

- ❖ **Key Elements of OTP:**
 - Removes legal requirement for a supervising physician agreement
 - Establishes majority-PA regulatory boards and includes PAs in medical or healing arts boards
 - Allows direct payment to PAs from public & private insurers

AIMS

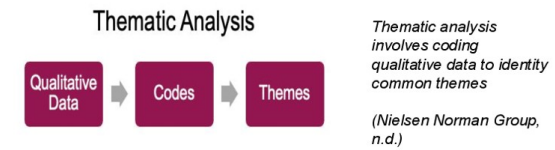
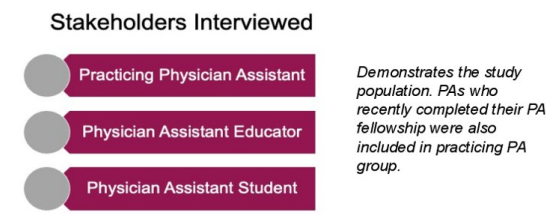
The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of the Optimal Team Practice law (H.B. 2043) on key stakeholders within the healthcare field. The following questions served as a foundation and guided all research conducted for this study. They also served as reference points when analyzing Zoom transcripts to identify key themes and subthemes.

- How are key members of the healthcare field directly affected by the passing of the Optimal Team Practice law (H.B 2043)?
- How does OTP affect practicing physician associates/assistants, physician associate/assistants educators, and physician associate/assistant students all within the state of Arizona?

METHOD

To explore the perspectives on Optimal Team Practice (OTP), I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis focused on key stakeholder groups in Arizona. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify and report patterns within qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the data's underlying meaning.

- Study Design: Qualitative thematic analysis
- Study Population: Practicing PAs, PA educators, and PA students in Arizona
- Data Collection: Zoom interviews, transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis
- Analysis Approach: Inductive approach to identify perceived benefits & consequences of OTP
- Sampling Method: Convenience sampling



1. What are your perceptions on how H.B 2043 will impact physician associate/assistant education?
2. For physician associate/assistant student: What are your perceptions on how H.B 2043 will impact future physician associate/assistant students?
3. How has H.B 2043 affected your clinical practice?
4. For physician associate/assistant student: What challenges have you encountered as a physician associate/assistant student since the passing of H.B 2043? What are the benefits?
5. For practicing physician associate/assistant: What are the challenges you have encountered in your clinical practice since the passing of H.B 2043? What are the benefits?
6. How will H.B 2043 impact the physician associate/assistant profession as a whole?
7. How will H.B 2043 impact the physician associate/assistant profession as a whole?
8. For physician associate/assistant student: How will H.B 2043 impact the work environment of the future role you are involved in?
9. What does autonomous clinical practice mean to you?

Excerpt of interview questions

RESULTS

When analyzing stakeholder perspectives on OTP, four key themes emerged from interviews with PA educators, practicing PAs, and PA students. These themes highlighted both the benefits and challenges of this policy change.

1. **No Change to PA Education:** OTP does not directly impact the PA curriculum. While there were initial concerns about potential curriculum changes, including whether PA programs would need to be expanded into doctoral programs, stakeholders agree that OTP does not mandate changes to PA curriculum.
2. **Increased PA Autonomy and Access to Care**
3. **Increased Collaboration**
4. **Commensurate with Nurse Practitioner (NP) Practice:** OTP aligns PA practice more closely with NP practice in terms of autonomy and hiring opportunities.

Direct quotes from the stakeholders interviewed, highlighting themes identified

Key Themes	Supporting Quotes
1. Increased Collaboration	Participant 9, a practicing PA with one year of experience, who recently finished their PA fellowship stated: "Just kind of helps solidify the importance of the PA in the team setting as well and their helpfulness down the line you know it can be used, as a way to see how well the PA operates (how effective, how efficient). And you know, maybe it could eventually influence, you know, salary and benefits, and you know, overall happiness with the profession."
2. Commensurate with NP Practice	Participant 8, a practicing PA with a year and a half of experience, who recently finished their PA fellowship stated: "You know, I think it's help PA's kind of catch up to where NPs are, not necessarily that I don't know that we'll ever be like independent practitioners, but I think that it is at least kind of loosening the reins on PAs, so that we're able to you know, practice as efficiently as NPs are, because I do know back in Georgia a lot of our physicians would have kind of lean towards hiring NPs because they had looser laws in terms of how many they could supervise and what exactly their role was, I'm hopeful this change will continue to let PAs not necessarily practice independently by any means, but at least play the kind of role that NPs have been able to play for a while and allow for us to have the same opportunities for jobs as NPs, just based on physicians preferences."

Key Themes	Supporting Quotes
3. No Change to PA Education	Participant 1, a PA educator with 20 years of experience who also played a role in passing OTP, stated: "I don't think it should impact it a lot, I think that what we are doing in education to get students ready to practice is appropriate and so, if you take the law at its word right, the preferred language is that PAs should be able to practice to their scope of practice, to their level of competence."
4. Increased PA Autonomy and Access to Care	Participant 2, a PA educator with 17 years of experience who also played a role in passing OTP, stated: "What this law is going to do is allow more PAs to come into practice that can pivot in different roles. If you're in a small rural community or an underserved community, and you need a family practitioner PA, then you've got it, if you need somebody that now can do behavioral health, dermatology, cardiology, women's health, those PAs can pivot into those roles instantaneously with you know direct supervision to autonomy levels depending. So if we're able to practice to the highest level of our education and experience, we just remove the administrative barrier that stopped people from being us and being relegated to say, a nurse, practitioner, or a physician. So I think this is increasing access to care in multiple different areas and allowing the healthcare workforce that currently exists to pivot into those vacuums or places where we need healthcare providers quickly rather than waiting for people to have to re-educate."

Direct quotes from the stakeholders interviewed, highlighting themes identified



Key subthemes identified among each stakeholder group interviewed

DISCUSSION

PA Educator Subthemes

PA educators highlight that OTP enhances advocacy and raises awareness of the PA profession. By removing barriers, legislators, employers, and patients gain a clearer understanding of PA practice. OTP also boosts PA students' self-confidence, preparing them for autonomous practice once they meet clinical hour requirements. Additionally, OTP increases clinical training opportunities by motivating employers to hire PAs and encouraging healthcare organizations to offer more training sites.

Practicing PA Subthemes

Practicing PAs emphasized that OTP will break down barriers, increasing access to care in rural communities and improving healthcare outcomes. They also noted that OTP will reduce physician burnout by eliminating the need for physicians to oversee every aspect of PA practice.

PA Student Subthemes

The PA student expressed that with OTP, responsibility for patient care shifts directly to the PA, meaning physicians are no longer legally liable for PA decisions when not directly involved in a case. This reduces malpractice risks for supervising physicians and promotes more autonomy for PAs, allowing them to take full ownership of their clinical decisions. The student also shared that OTP fosters stronger trust and teamwork between PAs and physicians, as PAs are trained to collaborate and refer when necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

Results indicated similar responses between groups, including increased PA autonomy and fostering greater collaboration within healthcare teams. Responses also reflected the impact removing restrictive barriers would have on increasing access to care and aligning PA practice more closely with nurse practitioners (NP) practice in terms of autonomy and responsibilities. The results demonstrate that OTP will lead to more efficient healthcare teams and better patient outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation committee, Professor Amber Brooks-Gumbert, MMS, PA-C, DFAAPA and Dr. Kristen K. Will, PhD, MHPE, PA-C.