

Seeing Potential: Bridging the Gap for Physician Associates in Ophthalmology

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BACKGROUND

- ❖ The United States is facing a well-documented shortage of healthcare providers, particularly as the population ages, which exacerbates the demand for eye care services.
- ❖ There is a projected 12% decline in the number of ophthalmologists from 2020 to 2035, while demand is expected to rise by 24%.
- ❖ Physician Associates (PAs) have been recognized as valuable resources in ophthalmology, helping reduce wait times and addressing both clinical and surgical needs. However, only 0.1% of PAs nationwide practice in ophthalmology, despite their proven effectiveness in other healthcare settings.
- ❖ There is limited research exploring the reasons behind the low numbers of PAs in ophthalmology, despite studies showing their potential contribution to reducing workforce shortages in this field.
- ❖ This study seeks to understand the barriers to integrating more PAs into ophthalmology and explores how they can address major gaps in ophthalmic care, particularly in terms of workforce shortages and accessibility.

OBJECTIVE

- ❖ To examine underrepresentation of PAs in ophthalmology, despite an ongoing shortage of healthcare providers and increasing eye care demand. Additionally, to investigate the specific roles of PAs within ophthalmology and identify barriers to facilitating their integration into ophthalmic practices.

METHODS

- ❖ Approved by Stanford Institutional Review Board (Protocol 71432)
- ❖ Study design & analysis: qualitative descriptive design with thematic analysis and coding
- ❖ Inclusion criteria: Required to be certified PAs currently practicing in ophthalmology. Required to be able to communicate in English, access and use Zoom, and be available during the study timeframe.
- ❖ Participants were recruited through an ophthalmology-focused PA email group, and eligibility was determined via an interest form on Qualtrics. Most participants were selected through criterion sampling, with one identified via convenience sampling.
- ❖ Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom in October 2023, lasting 30-60 minutes each. The interviews addressed three main objectives: daily experiences in ophthalmology, career pathways, and perceptions of the future of the field.
- ❖ Interviews were recorded and transcribed on Zoom, and stored securely on the Stanford University Zoom Cloud. Interviews were analyzed using Nvivo software. Two research staff were trained in qualitative data analysis by a qualitative research expert (AN). The two trained individuals independently applied open coding to identify unique codes and categories to enhance the rigor of results.

RESULTS

Overarching Theme: PAs play an integral yet underutilized role within ophthalmology teams and bring unique clinical expertise to the field

Category 1: <i>Ophthalmologists are not familiar with PAs' scope of practice</i>		Category 2: <i>PA didactic education and exposure to ophthalmology is limited</i>	
Having to sell my own job title	"The barrier really is trying to sell this idea because an ophthalmologist probably doesn't know they can hire a PA" (14) "So I put together a lot of materials and tried to outline how a PA would fit for their practice and it really worked out well...it seems like, you have to pave your own way. You had to create your own job description, basically" (14)	Lack of Experience	"I will say, ophthalmology is probably one of the more challenging ones for somebody without an ophthalmology background to move into; it definitely can be done, but it takes a PA that is motivated to continue to learn and work and expand, and then a practice that is really invested in making that PA into something really valuable" (18) "There are so many possibilities for PAs in this field, provided that they have the structured training. I think that's the toughest, most difficult barrier- getting that training necessary to be respected by the rest of the ophthalmology world"
No exposure during training	"They don't understand how they can use PAs, because in their training, you don't see PAs, and you know, the residents don't see PAs and what they can do" (15) "Again, ultimately, they've all been trained to do it independently, like often they just weren't trained to do surgery with PAs...I think a lot of it comes down to having someone they can trust" (15)	Lack of Exposure	"A potential barrier to getting into the field is just like people's lack of experience going into the field. Because if you never worked in ophthalmology beforehand and you go to PA school, let's just be honest about it, you have a 3 hour lecture on eyes and that's it." (18) "So it comes down to education. Educating practices that PAs can do this, these are things PAs can do. And then it comes down to educating PAs during PA school like, if you wanna do ophthalmology, there are things you can do to really optimize on-boarding" (19)
No reliable model	I think there's a ton of growth potential. I think advocacy is really important...It's hard for physicians to visualize what PAs can do in that field where there's not a model for it" (16) "I think there's still a lot of room for education amongst ophthalmologists just because it's still such an unknown thing, because we're just still not very common" (16)		
Category 3: <i>PAs enhance the established eye care team</i>		Category 4: <i>Eye care is in high and growing demand</i>	
Broad medical management knowledge adds unique expertise to the eye care team	"It's not versus. It's not optometry versus PA. It's ophthalmology plus optometrist plus PA, because both of us can do things that the other one can't" "So a good analogous specialty is orthopedics, where ortho PAs I think might be the highest single surgical specialty that PAs are in for a very similar reason; they need surgical assists there, but they also need the clinical management. There's a lot of follow-up visits in the expected course to recovery. It's a little bit of an unnecessary use of their (surgeons') skill set to be managing the clinical recovery from those surgeries, and I think ophthalmology PAs could really fit that as well"	Volume Control	"Ultimately, my outlook on it is...there's a growing shortage. I've had multiple retirements in the clinic I'm in within just the past 2 years I've been here. And that translates to a lot of surgical need...The ophthalmologists that I work with, their most valuable skill is in the operating room. The more time they can spend operating, the more good and value they're gonna provide for patients, and the clinical need is still there" Because I think the field is going to start realizing that oh, you have this PA who can kind of do a lot of different things, like they can fill a need in retina clinic doing, say intravitreal injections...but we can also do a lot of other minor procedures like lid procedures and other minor procedures, but doesn't take away any surgical volume from the ophthalmologist
Ophthalmologists feel satisfied	I've been received very positively. And I know they're really appreciative of my work and really rely on me. And I think that yeah, they've been very supportive. And I think the other attendings see that as well" "When I had my work anniversary, I was like, Oh my gosh! I did not think I would be doing this for this long. But I just really like it. I still really enjoy the doctors that I work with, which has probably been the biggest thing, that it's a really good relationship"	Increased Access	"I work currently with over 15 ophthalmologists. And we've gotten along very well...I think they ultimately realize you're another set of hands to help. There's more patients than we have providers. We're overwhelmed" "It's at the practice level. If you need another surgeon, then you need another surgeon. You don't need another PA...But if you're a practice where your surgical volume isn't the problem, you're just not able to keep up with the medical, clinical side of things, that's exactly where PAs step in. The shortage of practicing ophthalmologists in the coming decades is gonna be putting a big strain on that clinical side that I do think PAs can really fill well".
Room to Grow	"I think there's huge potential for growth. And it's untapped because there really aren't many PAs in ophthalmology. There's a lot that PAs can do...In retina they do a lot of injections and PAs can do that and help with volume" "The biggest thing is access. So there are a lot of relatively mundane eye diseases that need to be monitored and tracked over time that aren't gonna necessarily require surgery or specialty care. That's kind of a key role that I think a PA brings to ophthalmology"		

LIMITATIONS

- ❖ The primary limitation to this study was the relatively small number of participants. While our 7 participants represented a small percentage of the total ophthalmology PA population, the study reached saturation which lends credibility to our findings.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

- ❖ 7 participants, all employed at unique institutions and clinic settings
- ❖ 8 clinical disciplines represented
- ❖ Diverse array of experience levels ranged 1-30 years of experience, with a mean of 6.9 years

DISCUSSION

- ❖ The study highlights the crucial yet underutilized role of PAs in ophthalmology, emphasizing their unique clinical expertise and potential to improve patient care.
- ❖ The findings align with existing literature that acknowledges the shortage of providers. The clinical versatility of PAs helps to fill this gap by increasing access to care and alleviating the strain on ophthalmologists.
- ❖ The study calls for enhanced education, awareness to promote integration of PAs into ophthalmology practices to optimize care delivery and address workforce shortages in the field.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ The growing gap ophthalmology providers presents an opportunity to integrate PAs into the field, leveraging their skills to meet rising demand.
- ❖ Key challenges include ophthalmologists' limited familiarity with PA training, insufficient ophthalmology-specific education in PA programs, and the need for enhanced collaboration within eye care teams.
- ❖ Findings suggest that enhancing awareness of PA roles, expanding ophthalmology-specific education for PAs, and advocating for their inclusion in practice can help increase access.
- ❖ These insights can help shape current policies and guide future research aimed at enhancing integration of PAs into ophthalmology practice.