Acknowledging suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety in Physician Assistants

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PURPOSE: To understand the degree of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations in PAs and PA students.

Background
Suicide and suicidal ideation have not been closely studied in physician assistants (PAs). COVID-19 has brought additional stressors to the medical field, further increasing suicide risk. Previous findings illustrate, 14% of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe depression and 12% are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety.1 Comparatively, physicians are also at higher risk for depression and anxiety.2,3 Up to 6.4% of physicians having considered suicide in the past year.4 Despite the high risk for suicide, physicians are less likely to seek treatment compared to the general population since depression remains stigmatized in medical culture.5 We examined if similar attitudes existed among PAs and PA students.

Participants
November 2020 to a random sample of PAs and PA students (PA-S) who were part of a survey panel from the American Academy of PAs (AAPA).
Invited 598 PAs → 66 proceeded
Invited 503 PA-S → 160 proceeded
November 2020 as part of a random sample based survey hosted by the AAPA. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to a survey hosted by author 2.
Invited 394 PAs → 202 proceeded
Invited 494 PA-S → 437 proceeded
January 31 to February 1, 2021 as part of an annual census hosted by AAPA to all PAs in the US. At the end of this survey hosted by AAPA, respondents were invited to a survey hosted by author 2.
Invited 2,614 PAs → 666 proceeded

The overall estimated completion rate was 57.9%.

Risk of Depression
14.5%
(10.4% to 19.9% CI)
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe depression
8% in adults in US6

Risk of Anxiety
12.3%
(9.0% to 16.4% CI)
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety
19% in adults in US7

Thoughts of Suicide
8.8%
(6.7% to 11.2% CI)
of PAs said they have had thoughts of suicide since they started their career

Past Year
52.7%
(39.7% to 65.5% CI)
of PAs who have had thoughts of suicide said it was in the past year

Work Contribution
66.7%
(52.7% to 78.7% CI)
said that stressors from work contributed to their suicidal ideations or attempt.

Help Seeking Behaviors* by Gender
*for feelings of distress, including stress, burnout, depression or anxiety

No, and have not sought professional care in the past
No, but was under professional care in the past
Yes, planning to seek professional help
Yes, currently seeking professional help

Female
38.7%
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression, and/or had suicidal ideations since becoming a PA.
PAs were more likely to seek help for feelings of distress
Males were more likely to say “Yes, and have not sought professional care in the past.”

Future Research
Future research should understand how factors such as:
• Personality
• Social situations
• Licensure
Inhibit PAs’ help-seeking behaviors.

Future of PAs are currently seeking professional help for feelings of distress, including stress, burnout, depression or anxiety

References