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State Medical Board Disciplinary Actions against Physician Assistants: 2018-2022, Differences Between States and Nationwide Trends

Carrie Whiting, DMSc, PA-C, CAQ-Psychiatry, Natalie Perkins, Dr. OT, M. Ed, OTR/L, FIIE

Introduction:

- Although much work has been done on the reasons that physicians (medical doctors and Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine) are disciplined, the reasons and the trends for physician assistants being disciplined by state boards have not been enumerated.
- The number of physician assistants has increased in the last 10 years. In 2013 the number of physician assistants practicing in the United States was 95,583 but by the end of the 2022, the number had grown to 168,318 (Physician, 2012).
- Additionally, more physician assistants are entering specialty fields such as surgery, emergency medicine and psychiatry (Volpe, 2023), which can have higher risk in terms of adverse outcomes, and in of the type of medications that can be prescribed such as controlled substances.

Purpose of Study:

This study set to quantify the number of adverse disciplinary actions taken against physician assistants from 2018-2022 and determine if there are trends within certain states or nationwide for the types of discipline and for the reasons.

Hypothesis: The majority of disciplinary actions will be related to overprescription or diversion of controlled substances

Methods

- Data was collected from publicly available information such as a list of disciplinary reports or minutes from medical board meetings.
- When the data was not in an easily accessible format, instead of searching for disciplinary measures license number by license number, this author wrote to the state medical board clerk asking for those records.
- The data from all fifty U.S. states was included in this study, but the disciplinary actions from Washington D.C. and U.S. territories were excluded.
- Only adverse new adverse actions against physician assistant licenses were noted, not revisions or amendments to other orders.
- For some states such as Kentucky and Delaware, the reasons for discipline were often written as “unprofessional conduct” but the details of the hearing/conduct were not available online. In those cases, this author listed the disciplinary reason as “unprofessional conduct (unspecified)” and is awaiting further detail through the Freedom of Information Act to illuminate the case circumstances better.
- Disciplinary measures against active licensees in a state were counted, not denials of a new license in a state.

Results:

Table 1:
Numbers of Adverse Disciplinary Measures from 2018-2022 by state

State	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total	PA's in state in 2022*	% of PA's disciplined
Alabama	5	8	4	1	3	21	1209	1.74
Alaska	1	1	0	1	0	3	673	0.45
Arizona	8	8	9	9	11	45	3728	1.20
Arkansas	2	4	0	0	0	6	635	0.94
California	27	25	23	16	16	107	13068	0.82
Colorado	11	12	7	7	2	39	4537	0.86
Connecticut	2	0	1	1	1	5	2999	0.17
Delaware	1	0	1	0	0	2	487	0.41
Florida	9	9	5	10	7	40	9381	0.43
Georgia	1	2	3	2	1	9	4727	0.19
Hawaii	0	0	1	1	1	3	478	0.63
Idaho	1	2	3	1	0	7	1458	0.48
Illinois	1	1	1	3	2	8	4444	0.18
Indiana	4	2	1	4	0	11	2253	0.49
Iowa	2	0	0	11	0	13	1400	0.93
Kansas	0	4	0	1	0	5	1368	0.37
Kentucky	3	3	2	5	0	13	1782	0.73
Louisiana	2	6	2	0	1	11	1572	0.70
Maine	1	1	7	4	2	15	1045	1.43
Maryland	6	4	4	2	1	17	3638	0.47
Massachusetts	0	1	0	2	0	3	4550	0.07
Michigan	2	4	6	14	10	36	6645	0.54
Minnesota	4	3	1	5	2	15	3588	0.42
Mississippi	0	0	0	1	0	1	369	0.27
Missouri	3	1	0	1	1	7	1383	0.51

Table 1 (con):
Numbers of Adverse Disciplinary Measures from 2018-2022 by state

State	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total	PA's in state 2022*	% of PA's disciplined
Rhode Island	4	0	0	0	1	5	603	0.83
South Carolina	4	5	0	5	0	14	2507	0.56
South Dakota	2	0	0	0	0	2	644	0.31
Tennessee	7	3	10	14	5	39	3006	1.30
Texas	20	30	19	20	11	100	11008	0.91
Utah	0	0	2	1	0	3	2067	0.15
Vermont	3	2	5	0	0	10	437	2.29
Virginia	4	7	4	5	5	25	4536	0.56
Washington	1	0	0	2	4	7	3968	0.18
West Virginia	6	5	1	0	1	13	1084	1.12
Wisconsin	6	2	1	6	1	17	3491	0.49
Wyoming	0	0	0	0	1	1	296	0.33
Totals:	200	203	182	234	143	954		

*<https://www.nccpa.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2022-Statistical-Profile-of-Board-Certified-PAs.pdf>

- The harshest states for disciplinary measures, measured by the number of adverse disciplinary measures divided by the number of PAs in the state were: New Mexico, Vermont, Alabama and Nevada.
- The least punitive states were: Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey and Connecticut

Table 2: Disciplinary Measures 2018 by Type	Table 3: Disciplinary Measures 2019 by Type	Table 4: Disciplinary Measures 2020 by Type	Table 5: Disciplinary Measures 2021 by Type	Table 6: Disciplinary Measures 2022 by Type
Substance Use 21	Substance Use 21	Substance Use 42	Substance Use 23	Substance Use 29
Diversion Controlled Substances 7	Diversion Controlled Substances 15	Diversion Controlled Substances 9	Diversion Controlled Substances 15	Diversion Controlled Substances 5
Negligence in Rx Controlled Substances 25	Negligence in Rx Controlled Substances 17	Negligence in Rx Controlled Substances 15	Negligence in Rx Controlled Substances 11	Negligence in Rx Controlled Substances 6
Negligence in Standard of Care 16	Negligence in Standard of Care 11	Negligence in Standard of Care 16	Negligence in Standard of Care 28	Negligence in Standard of Care 20
Poor Medical Record Keeping 9	Poor Medical Record Keeping 3	Poor Medical Record Keeping 4	Poor Medical Record Keeping 1	Poor Medical Record Keeping 2
Unprofessional Conduct 15	Unprofessional Conduct 15	Unprofessional Conduct 14	Unprofessional Conduct 14	Unprofessional Conduct 6
Other 107	Other 100	Other 100	Other 100	Other 78
Total: 200	Total: 203	Total: 182	Total: 234	Total: 143

Discussion:

- Hypothesis disproved**, substance use from providers, not diversion or gross negligence the most common reason for provider disciplinary action.
- States like New Mexico, although having the most disciplinary actions per number of PAs in the state, often will refer providers to their Wellness Program to receive help with substance use instead of jumping straight to license revocation
- Gross negligence in the prescription of controlled substances, negligence in performing at the standard of care and unprofessional conduct are common themes for disciplinary actions. The severity of actions can vary between states. California trends towards license revocation and/or probation instead of just reprimands
- Record keeping is a common disciplinary infraction.
- Keeping up with CME requirements, especially in Alabama is important.
- Pay your taxes in general, but especially in Illinois!

References: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qFalWbRpZYr2juoOG0bZTZzomITPyriRzXd0vajVpTM/edit?usp=sharing>

Addendum for raw data/tables for all 50 states: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1r1JXHGOlz-53aNxBY9bq-Du8tjObq8ljl3BuRibCx8/edit?usp=sharing>