Physician assistants (PAs) have a generalist medical background that prepares them to work in otolaryngology practices. Not only do PAs perform a range of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, but they also enhance coordination of care and patient satisfaction. And, according to recent data from the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), for every dollar of charges a PA generates, the employer pays, on average, 30 cents to employ the PA.¹

Physician Assistants in Otolaryngology

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PAs practice medicine as part of the health care team managed by a physician and have the authority to diagnose and treat patients. PAs can perform physical exams, diagnose conditions and develop treatment plans, provide health counseling, prescribe medications and assist in surgery. PAs in otolaryngology are diverse and highly skilled clinicians who practice in varied settings, including general otolaryngology and head and neck surgery.

A recent survey of PAs in otolaryngology found that at least half of them performed mastoid cavity cleaning, nasal cautery, foreign body removals, anterior nasal packing, preoperative history and physical, excision/biopsy of lesions, fiberoptic laryngoscopy and nasal endoscopy (including postoperative debridements).²

PAs attend intensive medical education programs accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on
Education for the Physician Assistant. The average PA program is 27 months and is characterized by a rigorous, competency-based curriculum with both didactic and clinical components. This generalist medical education provides a solid foundation from which to address the diverse aspects of ENT/otolaryngology practice.

Before they can be authorized to practice, PAs must pass the national certifying examination administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. To maintain certification PAs must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and take a recertification examination every six years.

All states, the District of Columbia, and the majority of US territories authorize PAs to practice. In those jurisdictions, and in federal agencies, physicians may delegate to PAs duties that are within the physician’s scope of practice, the PA’s training and experience, and that are allowed by law.

**PAs in Action**

APPA interviewed leading PAs in otolaryngology. The following accounts, taken from these interviews, illustrate PA range and versatility in the workplace.

**Colorado Springs Practice Hires First PA**

The seven physician partners in the largest ENT practice in southern Colorado recently hired their first PA.

Her previous experience in surgical pediatric ENT has helped her integrate quickly into the busy practice.

The PA’s main practice area is in the clinic’s otolaryngic allergy department, where more than 50 percent of the clinic’s surgical patients receive treatment for related allergic conditions. Her work at the allergy treatment center allows the practice to treat patients in a timely and well-coordinated manner. The practice and patients benefit from her presence as a source of patient care and information throughout the treatment process.

One of the PA’s key responsibilities is allergy testing for patients age 12 to adult. She discusses test results with the patients’ primary ENT physicians to formulate a treatment plan and educates patients about results and treatment options. After preparing the treatment vials, she discusses possible adverse reactions with patients and is the designated emergency contact for any allergic reactions that may occur.

The PA and all ENT physicians attend a bi-monthly meeting where they discuss complex cases, coordinate patient care and address any practice issues. She also participates in research conducted by practice members, including one physician’s fellowship involving sublingual immunotherapy. The physicians have confidence in her abilities; as the practice representative for ENT conferences, she learns about new ENT techniques and technologies and shares them with the physicians upon her return.

**ENT Care for Families and Employer**

A PA in a busy solo-physician, general ENT practice in New Hampshire sees an average of 25 patients a day, treating a variety of ENT conditions including ear and sinus infections. This 26-year veteran
PA is adept at removing foreign objects from young patients’ ears and noses and, due to her expertise, patients are often referred to her from other practices.

Working with her supervising physician, she provides comprehensive postsurgical care for patients—such as those recovering from tonsil or sinus surgery or from correction of a deviated septum—and performs endoscopic sinus debridements. This PA makes the majority of postoperative rounds and takes call, work that frees her supervising physician to undertake more complex cases. She also makes time to teach PA students both in the classroom and in the office setting.

Young patients and their families appreciate the personalized medical care she provides. Her supervising physician appreciates having more billable clinical time due to her work; yearly, she alone conducts more than 2,000 postoperative visits. As practice revenues increase, her employer reports having extra time for challenging cases and, most important, his family.

**A Veteran Practitioner at Mayo Clinic**

One PA, a 1972 PA program graduate, has been employed by the Mayo Clinic in ENT practice for more than 30 years. This PA treats patients with a range of ENT conditions, including sinusitis, Meniere’s disease, hearing loss and vocal cord lesions. He screens patients for carcinomas of the larynx and treats ear infections with related conditions. He often can expedite patient visits and accommodates old and new patients with prompt appointments.

This PA enjoys a close and collegial clinical relationship with his supervising physicians and with the medical residents rotating through the department. Reflecting the importance of research and academic medicine at Mayo, he balances his clinical responsibilities with an assistant professorship at Mayo Medical School and the local PA program. He lectures to residents, medical students and PA students and has published articles on ENT topics in the *Journal of the American Academy of Physician Assistants* and other clinical journals.

**PA Educator-Clinician in ENT**

The Department of Otolaryngology at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) recently hired its first PA, who has quickly become an indispensable part of the medical team.

With supervision from the department chair and other department physicians, the PA evaluates new and return patients, performs initial and follow-up exams and develops treatment plans. She orders and analyzes diagnostic studies, assesses preoperative and postoperative patients, and sees “drop-in” patients with acute problems.

Her responsibilities include assisting with surgical procedures such as thyroidectomies, glossectomies and parotidectomies. She also performs skin and oral cavity biopsies, harvests and places skin grafts, places feeding tubes, removes impacted earwax and provides wound care.

Having expertise in cancer care from years of work at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center with renowned surgeon Helmuth
Goepfert, she sees patients once a week in the UTMB head and neck cancer clinic.

In the inpatient setting, the PA provides surgical and postsurgical care in the department of head and neck surgery. She also coordinates follow-up care with radiologists, oncologists, plastic surgeons, dental oncologists and speech therapists.

By making hospital rounds and coordinating the admission and discharge of patients, she helps everyone in the circle of ENT treatment—patient, family, physician and hospital staff—stay fully informed.

This PA also has an academic role with the UTMB PA program, where she teaches clinical medicine courses, trains visiting medical and PA students in ENT procedures, presents ENT-related lectures for first- and second-year PA courses, and helps coordinate ENT rotations.

**The PA Answer**

PAs make vital and varied contributions to the well-being of patients and to the quality of life of their employers. For more information on the roles and activities of PAs in ENT/otolaryngology, contact the Society of PAs in Otorhinolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery at 800-863-2307, or visit their website at www.entpa.org.

For additional information about PA scope of practice, physician-PA teams or how to hire a PA, browse AAPA’s resources at www.aapa.org.

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**References**

