Physician assistants (PAs) have a generalist medical background that prepares them to work with gastroenterologists. Not only can 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, for every dollar of charges a PA generates for the practice, the employer pays, on average, 30 cents to employ the PA.¹

PAs in gastroenterology and hepatology play roles as varied as the needs of the practices and patients they serve. These PAs care for patients in settings such as HMOs, inpatient hospitals, outpatient clinics and offices and VA hospitals and other government institutions.

By design, the physician-PA team enhances medicine. The education of PA students in a traditional medical school model, including intensive study in basic medical sciences and clinical subjects, prepares them to be comprehensive providers of physician-directed medical care. This educational foundation allows the PA to be an effective team member. In all states, the District of Columbia and the majority of US territories, physicians may delegate to PAs medical duties that are within the physician’s scope of practice, the PA’s training and experience and as authorized by state law. In the case of federally employed PAs, federal agency guidelines rather than state law determine their scope of practice.
Physician assistants are educated in PA 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. The programs are offered at medical schools, colleges and universities, teaching hospitals and through the U.S. Armed Forces.

The first year of PA education provides a broad grounding in medical principles with a focus on their clinical applicability. In the second year, students receive hands-on clinical training through a series of clerkships or rotations in a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings. PA students complete on average more than 2,000 hours of supervised clinical practice prior to graduation.

The PA’s scope of practice typically includes taking patient histories, performing physical exams, ordering laboratory data and preliminary radiological studies, formulating a differential diagnosis and establishing treatment plans, prescribing medications and providing in-depth patient education about treatment of both chronic and acute gastrointestinal (GI) and hepatology conditions.

PAs working with gastroenterologists perform a wide range of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, including flexible sigmoidoscopies, paracentesis, liver biopsies, esophageal and rectal manometry studies and assisting with PEG tube placement. In the hospital setting, they perform rounds, dictate daily progress notes and order discharge summaries.

According to the Gastroenterology Physician Assistants (GiPA), PAs in this field treat patients for a number of conditions:

- gastroesophageal reflux disease
- esophageal dysmotility
- esophageal cancer
- gastroduodenal ulcer disease
- celiac disease
- gallbladder disease and diseases of the biliary tree
- acute and chronic pancreatitis and other pancreatic diseases
- hepatitis B
- hepatitis C
- non-alcoholic fatty liver disease
- hemochromatosis
- autoimmune liver disease
- cirrhosis of various etiologies
- irritable bowel syndrome
- inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis
- colon cancer screening

**PA’s in Action**

AAPA interviewed leading PAs in gastroenterology and hepatology. The following accounts taken from the interviews illustrate PA range and versatility in the workplace.

**Facilitating Quality Care at the Scripps Clinic**

A PA at the Scripps Clinic in San Diego discovered a passion for hepatology while participating in a liver research fellowship. Hired to join the clinic after developing a close professional partnership with one of its lead investigators, he now treats patients with a variety of conditions.

Patients receiving treatment for cirrhosis are seen by the PA at least once a month. The PA engages both patients and their families in an intensive education about liver transplantation.

The PA-patient communication link enhances quality of care and outcomes.
For patients dealing with difficult courses of treatment, PAs provide the education, support and encouragement required to help them complete their treatment.

This well-coordinated and collegial team practice is based on mutual trust and respect. The physicians are not only confident in the PA’s diagnostic abilities, but also his judgment about transferring highly complex cases to a physician for diagnosis and care.

A Key Team Member at a Busy Hospital-Based Clinic

Another gastrointestinal PA anchors a busy clinic on the campus of an Arizona hospital with a team of five supervising GI physicians. Since hiring her, the clinic has reduced average waiting time for an appointment from a couple of months to several weeks if the patient chooses to see the PA for initial work up. This reduced waiting time has dramatically increased patient satisfaction and access to care. The PA sees approximately 30 new patients a week and 40 for follow-up visits.

The PA remains at the clinic full-time while the physicians travel back and forth between the endoscopy center, clinic and hospital. Although she treats her own patients in the office, she shares responsibility for patient care with her supervising physicians and consults them whenever necessary. The PA and her supervising physicians keep lines of communication open about the patients she sees; this candid communication is an integral part of PA practice. Because the PA attends to a substantial number of patients, her supervising physicians have more time to handle complex cases, perform procedures and round at the hospital.

The PA treats a large number of patients with hepatitis C, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis, irritable bowel syndrome and acid reflux. Yet she also enjoys the challenges of a broad array of other GI conditions. To promote patient education, she developed files of GI-related resources for patients and their families.

PAs Enhance Coordination of Care

Two PAs help a busy gastroenterology/hepatology practice bridge the realms of office and hospital by providing follow-up care for chronic hepatology conditions in both settings. In the office, the PAs generally see patients who require additional testing and long-term treatment. Hepatitis counseling is a key aspect of the PAs’ responsibilities. For patients dealing with difficult courses of treatment, PAs provide the education, support and encouragement required to help them complete their treatment.

In the hospital the PAs conduct rounds, provide consults and coordinate care for patients with hepatitis. The PAs are in constant contact with the team of five supervising physicians, and periodic team meetings ensure well-organized coordination of care.

The PAs find the contrasting environments of hospital and office stimulating, while their employers have found much-improved coordination of care through the ability to delegate care at both practice sites. The volume of patients visiting the practice also has increased with the inclusion of PAs as part of the provider team.

Specializing in Hepatology

A North Carolina-based physician-PA team provides care to hepatology patients. Many of their patients require ongoing care: about 75 percent of the patients seen by the PA suffer from a form of hepatitis; the other 25 percent have cirrhosis. A combination of clinical acumen and empathy helps this PA care for patients, many of whom require large measures of time and attention. She sees about 60 patients a week in coordination with her supervising physician.

After her supervising physician conducts initial patient visits, the PA provides follow-up care to patients. She performs liver biopsies, therapeutic paracentesis, reviews charts and conducts extensive patient education. The PA also created instructional material and holds classes to teach patients how to self-inject interferon. Not only does she wish to teach proper technique, but she also wants to engender a sense of community with and between the patients. Additionally, the PA works as a sub-investigator on clinical trials led by her supervising physician.

Reimbursement

Nearly all private payers cover medical and surgical services provided by PAs. However, private health insurance companies do not necessarily follow Medicare’s coverage policy rules. Because of the potential variation...
among insurance companies, practices should verify each company’s specific payment and coverage policies for PAs. AAPA has information about private payer policies available at www.aapa.org.

Medicare pays the PA’s employer for medical and surgical services provided by PAs in all settings at 85 percent of the physician’s fee schedule. These settings include hospitals (inpatient, outpatient, operating room and emergency departments), nursing facilities, offices, clinics, the patient’s home and first assisting at surgery. In certain settings, services that PAs provide may be billed at 100 percent under the supervising physician’s provider number by meeting the “incident to” or shared visit billing requirements.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia cover medical services provided by PAs under their Medicaid fee for service or Medicaid managed care programs. The rate of reimbursement is either the same as or slightly lower than that paid to physicians.

For more information about third-party coverage, visit the AAPA Reimbursement page at www.aapa.org.

THE PA ANSWER

Effectively treating patients with gastroenterological or hepatological conditions requires provider availability for education, counseling and follow-up care. PAs are a perfect resource for providing that extra measure of time and attention. PAs’ care also allows physicians to devote themselves to more complex cases or to simply enjoy a more relaxed schedule.

For more information about PA scope of practice, PA education and the physician-PA team, visit AAPA’s webpage at www.aapa.org.

Contact GIPA at http://gi-pas.org/ for additional information about gastroenterology and hepatology PAs.

REFERENCES


