Celebrating the PA profession’s 50th anniversary

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In celebration of the forthcoming 50th anniversary of the PA profession in the United States, we are pleased to introduce a yearlong series of special anniversary articles, beginning in this issue of JAAPA. Our series is part of a larger anniversary collection developed in partnership over the past year with a team of participants from the American Academy of PAs, the Journal of Physician Assistant Education (JPAE), the Physician Assistant History Society, and Wolters Kluwer publishing. Together, we have selected a diverse array of topics that illustrate and explore our dynamic PA history. In many of the pieces scheduled for JAAPA, we challenged authors to adopt an investigative style and draw lessons from the past with an eye on the future. The JAAPA series will offer articles in each issue (print and online) leading up to the 50th birthday in October 2017. Our collaborators at JPAE have developed a themed issue due in 2017 highlighting topics more relevant to an academic audience, and the PA History Society is sharing fascinating resources across both journals to bring colorful pieces of history to readers.

According to Robert Penn Warren, “History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.” In this spirit, JAAPA invites you to explore the past 50 years of PAs with us, and we challenge you to consider how PAs might position ourselves in the years ahead in ways that build on a history of innovation and continue to improve the lives and health of patients and communities. In today’s healthcare environment, we are constantly bombarded with disruptive and transformational changes that seek to lower costs, improve access, and increase quality of care. This volatile time challenges the professional identity and culture of all healthcare professionals, including PAs. We see the greatest threat as a potential loss of focus on the most fundamental aspects of care—meeting the needs of our patients and their families and partnering with them to improve their health and quality of life.

JAAPA commemorated the PA profession’s silver anniversary in October 1992 with a themed issue edited by Carl Fasser, PA. In his editorial “Earning the Silver, Going for the Gold,” Fasser said, “We hope that this issue will serve as a milestone to look back on when the profession celebrates its golden anniversary in the year 2017.” We’ve taken this challenge seriously. Many of the topics in this series expand on the 25th anniversary themes; additionally, we have committed to using an historical context to look toward the future. In that same 1992 issue, Jack Liskin, PA, described a look into the PA profession’s future: “The profession should continue to grow bigger and better, as long as its members and leaders remain good, smart, and vigilant.” Our series will describe how PAs have done this and also put forth challenges facing the profession today and in the years ahead.

One of JAAPA’s major goals for our series has been to create publishing opportunities not just for seasoned authors but also for first-time and developing authors. In some cases, we have paired seasoned authors with early to midcareer PAs to stimulate creative thinking across the generations and forge some unlikely (but we hope fruitful) collaboration. We also plan to enrich articles with online content including photos, videos, and interviews—many from the collections of the PA History Society. We hope these materials will inspire PA programs, PA organizations, and individual PAs to build and maintain their own history collections as we document the events of our careers and dynamic profession.

So, what topics are in store for you in this anniversary collection? We will explore professional issues as well as personal stories. You will read examples of how the PA profession—and individual PAs—daily increase healthcare access. We will examine workforce projections, the evolution of the physician-PA relationship, and newer roles for PAs within health system leadership. As JAAPA did in the silver anniversary issue, we will discuss women’s roles and the view of women in PA careers. You will learn from inspiring stories with colorful details of how PAs finally attained recognition and regulation in the last two states, and we will share stories from PAs making a global mark on healthcare through humanitarian efforts. We will revisit
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critical decisions that set the stage for PA inclusion in all the federal programs that grew healthcare in the United States, and much more.

Reflecting on the past 50 years of PA practice had to touch on the important effect PAs have had in expanding care for special populations and underrepresented groups. To highlight this effect, authors will share stories from the US Public Health Service and offer inside accounts of PAs caring for vulnerable populations and as rapid responders in disasters and epidemics ranging from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans to the Ebola crisis in Liberia. We are especially proud to feature a long-awaited account of senior US military PAs in the White House, providing care to the President and White House staff.

We hope we have piqued your interest in our anniversary series with this sneak peek, but we have surprises in store, too. As you encounter the anniversary series articles over the year ahead, we hope that PAs will realize even more opportunities to innovate and advance the profession in ways that continue to improve the health of patients. Hallmarks of the PA career are flexibility, creativity, and dynamic approaches to maximize care for our patients. Although much has been accomplished over the past 50 years, there is still much pioneering to be done!

Strengthening our roles—and developing new ones—is a major strategy as we move into the future. Leadership and professional networking deserve the PA profession’s time and attention. We must continue to frame our growth in ways that best meet societal need and improve access to high-quality care. Newer developing systems of care—both domestically and globally—increasingly rely on PAs to develop and expand new skill sets to provide readily available, efficient, and cost-effective care. Educational programs for PAs—but also for medical students and others—need PAs to be dedicated not just to education but also to promoting the PA role. The role models you will be introduced to in this series are exemplars for all of us.

We hope you enjoy this anniversary series, and we invite your participation through sharing your feedback online, via social media, or in letters to the editor. In crafting this editorial journey for you, we have been offered many opportunities to connect with talented, dedicated PAs all across the country from diverse specialties and representing every generation of PA. This experience reminded both of us that being a PA is the best career in healthcare, and our profession is filled with caring, compassionate, and inspiring people. JAAPA