

How to Talk about PAs

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A Guide for Writing and Talking About PAs

The explosive growth of the profession, coupled with the continued modernization of PA laws, is rapidly changing the way PAs practice and the language we use to describe what they do. This is a guide to communicating about the profession in a way that reflects modern PA practice. If you have questions, please contact communications@aapa.org.

What is a PA?

PAs are medical providers who diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, and often serve as a patient's principal healthcare professional. With thousands of hours of medical training, PAs are versatile and collaborative. PAs practice in every state and in every medical setting and specialty, improving healthcare access and quality.

The PA abbreviation

Use "PA" as the title of the profession, not "physician assistant," in all copy. If you must spell it out to aid an external audience, only use "physician assistant" once in parentheses after the first PA reference (e.g., "PA (physician assistant)"). For all subsequent references, use "PA."

The PA Honorific

To promote uniformity of address in clinical and other settings, use PA as the honorific before the person's name, e.g., PA Pam Smith or PA Smith. Encourage the adoption of PA [surname] as the preferred form of address for PAs among staff and external audiences, unless a more suitable formal address is appropriate, such as military rank or academic role.

What do PAs do?

PAs' specific duties depend on the setting in which they work, their level of experience, their specialty area, and state laws. Among other duties, PAs can take medical histories, conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, develop treatment plans, counsel on preventive care, perform medical procedures, assist in surgery, write prescriptions, make rounds in hospitals and nursing homes, and do clinical research. To learn more about PAs visit aapa.org.

Outdated Lexicon/Myths/Misperceptions

- Inaccurate terminology: *"PAs are mid-level providers, physician extenders, non-physician providers, advanced practice providers, or advanced practice clinicians."*

These terms are often misunderstood by consumers and do not accurately portray or describe how PAs practice medicine to other providers or patients. Further, they do not reflect PAs' license or legal title. If PAs need to be referenced as part of a larger group, use "healthcare providers," "healthcare

practitioners,” or “clinicians,” but the preferred reference would include simply the name of each profession (e.g., “PAs and NPs”).

- Inaccurate terminology: *“PAs work on physician-led teams” or “PAs are supervised by a physician.”*

PAs have long believed that the best medicine is practiced in teams. Today’s PAs collaborate with physicians and many state laws already reflect this. In practice, a PA’s scope of practice typically grows over time with clinical experience. It is common for a PA to serve as the lead on care coordination teams and see patients in all settings without a physician present. In fact, in many rural and underserved areas, a PA may be the only health care provider for hundreds of miles.