

Factors that Influence the Hiring of Physician Assistants by Specialist Physicians: A Pilot Study

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Introduction

Traditionally the role of a physician assistant (PA) has been to practice in traditional primary care specialties (family practice, pediatrics, internal medicine).¹ While many PAs are still working in primary care, there has been a shift in recent years to PAs working in specialty practice.^{1,2} According to the most recent national census data released by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA 2005 Census), 61.6% of practicing PAs respondents nationwide and 49.7% of practicing PAs respondents graduating from Wichita State University are now practicing in a non-primary care specialty area.³ This has increased significantly since 1996, when approximately 46% of responding PAs nationwide practiced in a specialty other than primary care. The factors behind this shift away from primary care into specialty care by PAs have not been well studied. Additionally, the relationship between the PA who works in specialty care and their supervising physician has not been well researched.⁴ The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that may influence specialist physicians in hiring of a PA.

Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Design

This pilot study was administered through the Department of Physician Assistant at Wichita State University from June to July 2005. A survey instrument was designed to examine the attitudes of specialist physicians that influence hiring advanced registered nurse practitioners (ARNPs) or PAs (collectively “midlevel providers” or MLPs). The survey was reviewed by community PAs and physicians in an effort to improve face and content validity. Data were analyzed using standard statistical measures for nominal data.

Participants

The survey was mailed to specialist physicians in Sedgwick County. Sedgwick County is an urban county in South Central Kansas that serves as a tertiary referral center for medical care in Western and South Central Kansas. The survey sample was obtained from the Medical Society of Sedgwick County and included 473 specialist physicians. Physicians in specialties including, but not limited to dermatology, cardiology, nephrology, and infectious disease were surveyed.

Results

A total of 473 surveys were mailed; 175 valid surveys were returned for a response rate of 37%. The nature of educational training, clinical skills, overall abilities, and medical knowledge base were most frequently identified as factors that would lead to hiring.

This study examined only a few factors that were identified from the literature as potentially affecting the hiring of PAs. These factors included knowledge of PA state regulations, physician experience with MLPs in medical school or residency, age of specialist physician, and number of years the specialist physician has been in practice.

- The majority of specialty physicians surveyed employ MLPs (57%) and they have for several years.
- Specialist physicians were generally satisfied with PAs (90.9%) and ARNPs (89.5%) for the support they provide to their practices. This is consistent with a study conducted by Salcido et al. That study examined the utilization of PAs in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Salcido et al also concluded that physicians who employ PAs “remain positive with regard to continued utilization of PAs” and “value their contributions”.⁵
- A relatively large group (30-40%) plan to hire MLPs in the future.
- Specialist physicians indicated that nature of educational training (i.e. medical model for PAs vs. nursing model for ARNPs), clinical skills, overall abilities, and medical knowledge base would lead to hiring a PA.

In addition, post hoc analysis revealed:

- Specialist physicians who were knowledgeable about PA state practice regulations were more inclined to employ a PA. This indicates there is a possible correlation between a physician’s knowledge of state PA practice regulations and the hiring of PAs by specialist physicians. This conclusion is similar to a conclusion reached in a study by Kizer et al, which noted a direct correlation between understanding of regulations and utilization of non-physician practitioners in the VA healthcare system.⁶ In that study, Kizer et al concluded that lack of knowledge of state regulations was a barrier to utilization of non-physician practitioners.⁶
- Experience in medical school or residency with MLPs influenced whether specialist physicians currently employ or have ever employed an MLP. This correlation was suggested, but not examined, by Grandinetti in connection with a study that evaluated physicians’ use of MLPs.⁷
- Younger specialist physicians (40-49) were more likely to have ever employed a PA. This finding is consistent with a study by Grandinetti that concluded younger physicians are more likely than older physicians to employ an MLP.⁷

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the convenience sample of specialist physicians in an urban county of Kansas. This sample may not be an accurate representation of the trends statewide or nationwide. Another limitation is that the physicians surveyed were drawn from a membership list of the Medical Society of Sedgwick County. The percentage of specialist physicians in Sedgwick County who belong to this group is unknown.

Conclusion

Numerous factors may influence the hiring of PAs by specialist physicians. This study examined only a few of those factors including knowledge of PA state regulations, physician experience with MLPs in medical school or residency, age of specialist physician, and number of years the specialist physician has been in practice. Physicians who were more knowledgeable about PA state regulations were more likely to employ a PA, indicating that knowledge of state PA regulations does influence the hiring of PAs by specialist physicians. Physicians who did not have experience in medical school or residency with a PA were less inclined to employ or have ever employed a PA, also indicates that experience in medical school or residency influences the hiring of PAs. Younger physicians were more likely to have ever employed a PA. This indicates age does influence the hiring of PAs; however, this should be interpreted with caution because younger physicians may have had more exposure to PAs in medical school or residency. Finally, the number of years the specialist has been in practice was not found to be significant and therefore cannot be said to influence the hiring of PAs by specialist physicians.

This study is valuable in that it is the first study to examine what factors influence the hiring of PAs by specialist physicians. As the population continues to age and demand for healthcare increases, it is important to examine trends in employment of physician assistants and the factors that affect this demand. From an educational perspective, it is important to identify potential changes in curriculum which may be required as a result of changing workforce issues..

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