What is a physician assistant? What can a P.A. do?

A physician assistant (P.A.) is a licensed health professional who practices medicine under the supervision of a physician. A physician assistant provides a broad range of health care services that were traditionally performed by a doctor. As part of the physician/P.A. team, a physician assistant exercises considerable autonomy in diagnosing and treating illnesses.

What a physician assistant does varies with training, experience, and state laws. In general, P.A.'s can provide approximately 80 percent of the services typically provided by a family physician. They perform physical exams, diagnose illnesses, develop and carry out treatment plans, order and interpret lab tests, suture wounds, assist in surgery, provide preventive health care counseling, and in 39 states can write prescriptions. A P.A. can do whatever is delegated to him/her by the supervising physician and allowed by law. In most states, a P.A. can treat patients when the physician is away from the practice.

The scope of the P.A.'s practice corresponds to the supervising physician's practice. For example, the P.A. working with a surgeon would be skilled in surgical techniques in the operating room, perform pre- and post-operative care, and be able to perform special tests and procedures.

What is the difference between a P.A. and a physician?

Physician assistants are trained in the medical model. In some schools they attend many of the same classes as medical students. One of the main differences between P.A. education and physician education is not the core content of the curriculum but the amount of time spent in school. The length of a P.A. program is about two thirds that of medical school. Physicians are required to do an internship, and the majority also complete a residency in a specialty; P.A.'s do not have to undertake an internship or residency. A doctor has complete responsibility for the care of the patient; P.A.'s share that responsibility with the doctors. Doctors are independent practitioners; P.A.'s practice medicine under the supervision of a physician.

Get a great start at UTEP on the path to becoming a Physician Assistant. For more information, contact:

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