

Physician Assistants (PAs) are highly skilled members of the health care team who, under the supervision of a licensed physician, provide diagnostic and therapeutic patient care in a variety of medical specialties and practice settings. PAs are trained and utilized to obtain medical histories; perform complete physical examinations and minor surgical procedures; order, perform and interpret routine diagnostic tests; develop diagnostic and management plans and provide treatment for persons with acute and chronic illness. PAs often act as first or second assistants in major surgery and provide pre- and post-operative care. In 49 states (excluding Indiana), PAs write prescriptions.

About one-half of all PAs work in primary care, that is family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology. Others work in specialty areas, such as general and thoracic surgery, emergency medicine, orthopedics, and geriatrics. In some rural areas, where physicians are in short supply, PAs serve as the only providers of health care, conferring with their supervising physicians and other medical professionals when needed and as required by law. In California, Spanish-speaking or minority graduates are in great demand to work in underserved areas or with minority populations.

A recent survey by the American Academy of Physician Assistants reported that PAs who are not self employed and worked 32 hours/week minimum earned a mean income of \$84,396. Salaries for PAs typically vary by specialty, setting, number of hours worked, number of hours on call and years of experience.

## EDUCATION

The American Academy of Physician Assistants at [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org) offers a free online list of PA training programs in addition to information on PA careers, education and training. More detailed information on PA programs can be obtained by subscribing to the Online PA Programs Directory, published by the Physician Assistant Education Association, at [www.paeaonline.org](http://www.paeaonline.org).

PAs are trained in intensive education programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs. The typical physician assistant program lasts about 2 full years and usually requires at least 2 years of college and significant health care experience for admission. UCSD students may wish to complete a bachelor's degree at UCSD while working part-time and in the summers in a position with patient contact such as a nurse's aide/orderly or as an emergency medical technician. PA education consists of classroom and laboratory instruction in the basic medical and behavioral sciences (such as anatomy, pharmacology, pathophysiology, clinical medicine, and physical diagnosis), followed by clinical rotations in internal medicine, family medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine, and geriatric medicine.

All PA programs must meet the same curriculum standards, but programs do follow different models and award a variety of credentials. Some award an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree as well as a certificate of completion, but such a degree is not necessary to be a licensed physician assistant. PAs must pass a national certifying exam before they can practice. Completion of an accredited PA training program, regardless of degree, qualifies applicants to sit for the exam.

There are ten programs in California, which offer the certificate of completion and/or bachelor's or master's degrees. They are: Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science (Los Angeles), Loma Linda University, Riverside County Regional Medical Center/Riverside Community College, Samuel Merritt College (Oakland), San Joaquin Valley College, Stanford University Medical School, Touro University California College of Health Sciences, UC Davis, University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, and Western University of Health Sciences (Pomona).

## ADMISSIONS

PA programs usually require that applicants complete at least 90 quarter units of college-level work prior to enrolling in a PA program. Pre-requisite coursework may include:

mathematics	sociology/anthropology	physiology	chemistry
microbiology	organic chemistry	humanities	physics
psychology	English composition	anatomy (may be taken at community college)	

**Students should check current admission requirements at each school to which they might apply before planning their undergraduate course work. All programs recommend or require direct patient care experience, often 1-2 years full-time, with the amount and type varying by program.** This experience is also helpful in confirming career choice, and may have the added benefit of resulting in a strong letter of recommendation when applying. Most programs require three letters of reference, as well as a personal interview, as part of the application process. Those applying to master's programs will have to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) general test and have their scores sent directly to PA programs. GRE information and applications are available in Career Services and on the Web at <http://www.gre.org>.

Applicants should apply early for PA training programs, preferably in the fall for starting the following summer. Deadlines vary. The Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) is available to applicants, but currently only half of California PA programs participate (with a greater percentage participating in other states). CASPA's website is [www.caspaonline.org](http://www.caspaonline.org). Applicants send to the service one set of materials: an on-line application, standardized test scores, transcripts, and recommendations. After authenticating, CASPA will photocopy and distribute the application materials to each member school the applicant designates. Applicants need to check with the individual school(s) for additional information about supplemental applications or other requirements. Some schools require both the CASPA and a secondary application. Applicants should apply directly to those schools that are not participating in CASPA.

## RESOURCES IN CAREER SERVICES

Advisors in the Professional & Graduate School Advising (PGSA) area are available to help students and alumni registered with the Career Services Center. Services include critique of the application essay, a required part of the application, and advisors can also discuss any individual problems or concerns. Appointments can be made in person or by calling 858-534-4939. The Career Services Center also provides help preparing for the interview. Review the handouts on essay writing, interview preparation, and obtaining letters of reference for more information, available in the Career Services Center and on our website <http://career.ucsd.edu/>.

The Career and Internship Advising library in the Career Services Center includes a book, *Opportunities in Physician Assistant Careers*, which is a good resource for those who are beginning to explore the profession. For specific educational program information, see the "Physician Assistant" binder in the graduate school library of the Career Services Center. Visit the "Getting Experience" section of the "Health Professions" page on our website, <http://career.ucsd.edu/L3/sa/PHealth.shtml> for additional suggestions to gain experience.