

House Calls

What in the World is a Physician Assistant?

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

“What in the world is a Physician Assistant anyway? Are you a doctor or a nurse?” “Neither”, I reply. “Can you really write prescriptions? You actually run your own practice?” “Yes” I reply. “You mean you physically come to my house to see me, like in the old days?” “Uh-huh”. “Do you mean to tell me you actually carry a black bag?” “Absolutely”, I smile. It’s amazing how many times I get asked these questions on a weekly basis. I enjoy taking those opportunities to enlighten my patients on the role of PAs (Physician Assistants).

In the late 1950’s, the concept of the Physician Assistant profession was born by Dr. Eugene Stead, then chair of the Department of Medicine at Duke University. He was searching for ways to increase access to medical care especially in rural areas, as well as provide competent support for physicians. Eventually, Dr. Stead saw the opportunity to utilize the military medics returning from war. These medics essentially had the on-the-job training as doctors while at war, however, they were not educated through a traditional medical school program, so were not qualified as physicians. They could evaluate, diagnose, and treat patients and therefore performed tasks far beyond the capabilities of a nurse. In order to find a place for these qualified medical professionals to fit into the conventional medical arena, the first PA program was born. In 1967, the first 3 PA pioneers graduated from Duke University, and paved the way for thousands of other people seeking this mid-level medical profession. Currently, PA programs follow a ‘condensed medical school’ type of curriculum. In 2008, it is estimated there are now over 68,000 Physician Assistants practicing in all specialties of medicine throughout the United States. There are currently 141 accredited PA programs throughout the country, turning out approximately 4600 new graduates each year.

Physician Assistants are dependent medical providers that practice under the supervision of a

licensed physician. Each state has its own set of laws for PAs to abide by, and in North Carolina, it is acceptable for a Physician Assistant to own their own medical practices, and to have a physician supervisor in a remote location, as long as he or she is available immediately by phone for patient consultations as needed. There are practicing guidelines each PA must follow, outlining the scope of their practice. Within that scope, there are details as to what types of patient ailments may be seen and treated by the PA, and what type of medications may be prescribed by the PA. Physician Assistants must pass a national certifying exam, with re-examination every six years. Like physicians, they must accumulate continuing medical education yearly, maintain active state licensure, and are mandated by the state Medical Board.

Medical House Calls is a medical practice I founded in 2002, and has fortunately found its niche in the medical community in the Outer Banks. After practicing in a high volume Memphis Tennessee Emergency Department for six years, I relocated to the Outer Banks to take a position with one of the former walk-in medical centers. It did not take long to realize the need for another option of care for the locals and tourists, who had quick, non-emergent medical conditions. I decided to take the medical care to them. There is a significant following of local patients that utilize Medical House Calls when their primary medical providers are not available, or when they do not have time to wait in a walk-in clinic. I see the patients in their homes, workplace, and I’ve even treated a few children at the soccer field. “It is so great to have Rikki come to the house when I am not feeling well,” states Christine Hawes, a Medical House Calls patient, “She is accessible, quick to arrive, and so nice! Rikki is thorough in her evaluations and always takes the time to explain conditions and discuss treatment options all in the comfort of my home.” Summer tourists have taken advantage of the convenience of Medical House Calls more and more each year. They find the convenience of having a medical provider treat them at their vacation home, or even meet them at the pool, as an incredible perk to staying in the Outer Banks. It’s amazing how grateful people are when they know their child’s ear infection can be treated at their cottage, without missing a day of surf and sun on their long awaited vacation. “Our 3 year old daughter became sick while on vacation” explained the Goodwins, a family visiting from Pennsylvania “Our rental company, Twiddy, recommended Medical House

Calls. Rikki was at our vacation home within an hour, made a diagnosis of strep throat and our daughter was back on track by the next day. It will make all of our future stays just a little more comforting to know Rikki is there for us.” In the 6 years Medical House Calls has been established, there has been exemplary patient satisfaction with the quality of the care given, and the patients are content being evaluated, diagnosed, and treated by a Physician Assistant. Whenever there is a medical concern that falls outside the parameters of the scope of practice, the patient is immediately referred to one of the local medical facilities. This practice would not be a reality without a Physician Assistant.

There are at least 15 Physician Assistants currently practicing on the Outer Banks according to the Outer Banks Physician Extenders Association. Their Secretary, Zoë Sherman, PA-C, is employed at Beach Medical Care. She graduated from the Duke PA program and took a position as a Neurosurgical PA prior to joining the Beach Medical Care team 5 years ago. “I enjoy the folks on the Outer Banks, and giving them medical advice” said Sherman, “I also like the kind of medical care Beach Medical provides: a combination of urgent care and family practice. I like suturing wounds and minor surgical procedures especially. I don’t want anyone to get hurt, but if it happens I like to be the one to close their wounds.” PA Sherman has built up an impressive patient base that considers her their primary care provider. Patients that utilize Beach Medical Care have become accustomed to being treated by mid level practitioners over the years. Those practitioners are well accepted in the community as the highly trained medical professionals they are. Beach Medical employs 4 physicians and 5 midlevel practitioners to include 4 PAs and 1 nurse practitioner.

In North Carolina, nurse practitioners and physician assistants have very similar roles. The main difference is in the training. Generally, a nurse practitioner is first trained as a nurse, and then seeks additional education to become licensed as a nurse practitioner. They work with a collaborating licensed physician, and are mandated by the state Nursing Board. Nurse practitioners must pass a national certifying exam, maintain active state licensure, and accumulate continuing medical education hours. With the rising costs of healthcare in this country, mid level practitioners, both

Physician Assistants and Nurse Practitioners will presumably become even more valuable with each passing year. With the relative shortage of healthcare providers in the Outer Banks, the mid level practitioners are definitely an asset to our community. You will have the opportunity to be treated by a mid-level provider in practically every healthcare setting in our small corner of the world. They are practicing in many of the medical specialist’s offices, the hospital, the walk in clinics, the health department, and you’ll even see one carrying a black bag making house calls!

Rikki Schuster, PA-C is a certified Physician Assistant with over 12 years of experience practicing medicine. Appointments can be made with her through Medical House Calls at 252-475-2007. www.obxmedicalhousecalls.com