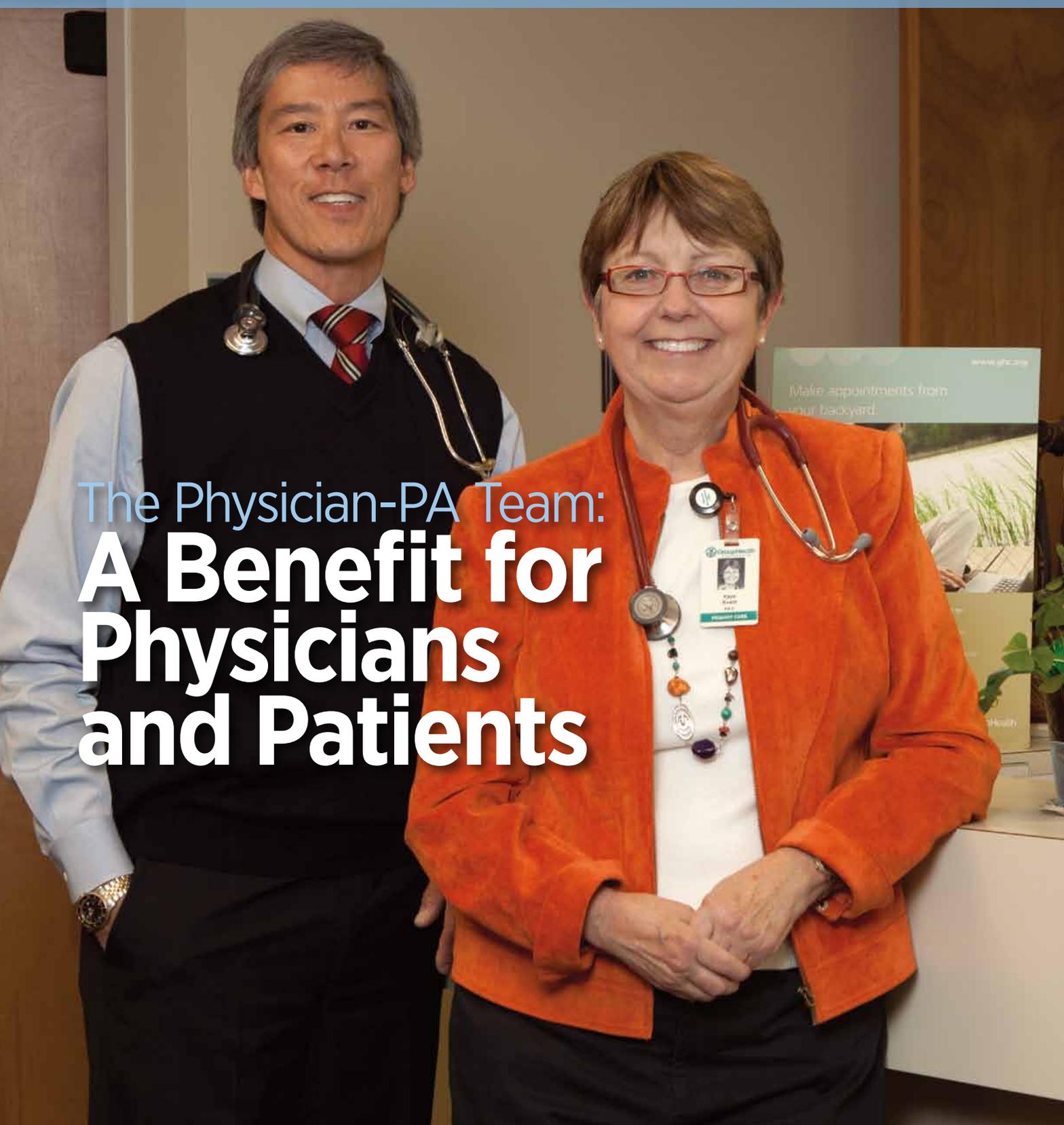


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The Physician-PA Team:  
**A Benefit for  
Physicians  
and Patients**

# The Physician-PA Team: A BENEFIT FOR PHYSICIANS, PRACTICES AND PATIENTS

**I**N 1965, RESPONDING TO a shortage and uneven distribution of primary care physicians, Eugene Stead, M.D., of Duke University Medical Center put together the first class of physician assistants (PAs). He selected four former Navy corpsmen who had considerable medical experience in Vietnam and based the curriculum in part on his knowledge of fast-track training of doctors in WWII. Two years later, a second PA program called MEDEX was established by Richard Smith, M.D., at the University of Washington. Since then, PA programs have blossomed and continued a curriculum using the rigorous physician medical model, often sharing classes, facilities and clinical rotations with medical students.

## What Is a Physician Assistant?

A PA is a nationally certified and licensed health professional who has a

broad, generalist, master's level medical education and practices as part of a physician-led team. PAs deliver a comprehensive range of medical and surgical services as delegated to them by their supervising physicians. They conduct physical exams; diagnose and treat illnesses and injuries; manage chronic conditions; order and interpret tests; write prescriptions; perform minor surgical procedures; counsel on preventative health care; round on nursing home and hospital patients; and assist in surgery.

## Physician-PA Team

The PA profession was founded on, and remains committed to, the concept of team practice. Because PA programs use curricula similar to that used in medical schools, PAs and physicians learn similar approaches to medical reasoning. This is one reason why physician-PA teams function so effectively in the clinical workplace.

Working in all medical and surgical specialties, the physician-PA team thrives in an environment of mutual respect, trust and inter-reliance. Within this environment, PAs are able to practice with a large degree of delegated autonomy, consulting with their physicians when needed and helping both physicians and practices function more efficiently. Numerous studies have found that the quality of care that PAs provide is comparable to that of physicians.<sup>1,2</sup> Effective physician-PA teams improve patient access and satisfaction, increase revenues and reduce physician workload.<sup>3,4</sup>

Steve Tanaka, M.D., family practitioner at Group Health, says, "PAs are essential when it comes to providing health care access to our patients. Patients are often able to make appointments more quickly with a PA. Kaye provides excellent health care to our patients."

PAs are also particularly suited to play a central role in the patient-centered medical home model because PA education is rooted in providing team-based care. As key members of the team, PAs can ensure continuity, and comprehensiveness and coordination of care, working with family physicians and other health care providers.<sup>5</sup>

## Scope of Practice and Prescriptive Authority

A PA practices medicine within the scope of the supervising physician, taking into account the PAs training and any specific restrictions delineated by Washington state law or institutional policy.

PAs in Washington state can prescribe legend drugs as well as controlled substances (Schedule II-V). PAs obtain and use their own federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) registration number.

Kaye Kvam, M.P.A.S., PA-C, of Group Health Family Practice in Kent, WA, and patient



## Reimbursement for PA Services

Nearly all private payers cover medical and surgical services provided by PAs.

Medicare pays the PA's employer for medical and surgical services provided by PAs in all settings at 85% of the physician's fee schedule. These settings include hospitals (inpatient, outpatient, operating room and emergency departments), nursing facilities, offices, clinics and the patient's home and first assist in surgery. In certain settings, services that PAs provide may be billed at 100% under the supervising physician's provider number by meeting the "incident to" billing requirements.

Medicaid's rate for reimbursement for PA services is either the same or slightly lower than that paid to physicians.

## Benefits of Utilizing a PA

**Easing physician workloads:** PAs provide quality care and improve patient flow and access to care. This allows physicians time to manage more complex cases. An American Medical Association survey found that PAs enhance practice efficiency. Solo practice physicians who employ PAs experience expanded practice, greater efficiency and greater access to care for their patients.<sup>6</sup>

**PA cost-effectiveness:** According to the Medical Group Management Association, PAs generate revenues greater than what their compensation costs employers. The most recent report shows that for every dollar of charges a PA generates for the practice, the employer pays, on average, 36 cents to employ the PA.<sup>7</sup>

Allison Warmington, PA-C, of Valley Surgical Specialists in Renton, WA, and patient



Jason Hussey, PA-C, of Multicare Orthopedics & Sports Medicine in Puyallup, WA

**Boosting patient satisfaction:** Hiring a PA has been shown to enhance patient satisfaction. Further, with a PA on staff, patient waiting times are decreased, which improves patient satisfaction through increased access to health care.<sup>3</sup>

Today, there are approximately 73,000 PAs practicing throughout the United States (2,200 PAs in Washington). PAs practice in all settings (clinics, HMOs, solo practices, hospitals, rural and inner city areas etc.) and virtually all specialties (cardiology, rheumatology, OB/GYN, pediatrics, GI, pain management, occupational medicine, interventional radiology and general surgery, to name a few).

In Washington, family medicine/IM utilizes the highest number of PAs followed by emergency room medicine, orthopedics and dermatology.

The PA concept has been so successful in the United States that PA programs have been established around the world (Netherlands, UK, Scotland, Canada, Ghana, Germany and South Africa) with

more programs pending.

Who could have imagined that one man's concept would evolve into such an important and successful medical profession. A profession committed to providing cost-effective, quality health care to patients as part of the physician-PA team.

*For more information, visit [www.wapa.com](http://www.wapa.com) and [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org).* ■

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# Washington Academy of Physician Assistants

2033 Sixth Ave. Suite 1100  
Seattle, WA 98121

**Visit us online! [www.wapa.com](http://www.wapa.com)**

Phone: (206) 956-3624 or 1-800-552-0612 ext 3006

Email: [LMK@WSMA.org](mailto:LMK@WSMA.org)