Oral Health Integration Into Physician Assistant Clinical Practice: A National Survey of 2014 Physician Assistant Program Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of study: Integrating primary health and oral health services is a strategy to increase access to dental care. Physician assistants (PAs) are increasingly educated to provide oral health assessment services in their clinical practices. This study examined whether PA specialty and practice setting were determinants of oral health competencies in PA education.

Methods: This study used an online survey of a random sample of 2,500 graduates from 166 ARC-PA accredited education programs in the US in 2014 to ask about their education in oral health competencies and provision of oral health assessment and screening services in their current clinical practices. The sample was weighted by the program size.

Key Findings: The survey results also suggest that despite general acknowledgement that oral health is an important part of medical care, more than half of PAs who provided oral health services in their clinical practice received education in OH competencies and worked in primary medicine or urgent care. Slightly more PAs who provided OH services also worked in inpatient settings and were located in urban areas.

RESULTS

Study Sample

- The study sample consisted of 2,500 PAs who graduated from a PA professional education program in 2014.
- Sample was drawn from a database supplied by AAPA that included 6,100 PAs who graduated from one of the 166 accredited education programs in the US in 2014.
- Number of PAs selected from each education program was proportional to the total # nationally.

Survey Instrument

- The survey was developed based on the insights and suggestions provided by PAs, educators, researchers, and recent graduates during 12 pre-survey interviews.
- The final survey instrument consisted of 14 questions about:
  - Education and training in OH competencies,
  - Implementation of OH services in clinical practice,
  - Specialty, practice setting, and geography.

Survey Administration

- The survey was web-based (built on the Qualtrics platform) and was open for 3 months.

RESULTS (cont.)

Over a third (35.7%) of PAs provided any OH services in their current clinical practice. More than half of PAs “often” or “always” referred patients to a dental provider when needed, examined & assessed the oral cavity, and screened patients with dental complaints, smoking, and diabetes.

Table 1. Characteristics of PAs responding to Integration of OH Services into Clinical Practice (n=294)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of PAs</th>
<th>Providing OH Services (n=105)</th>
<th>Not Providing OH Services (n=189)</th>
<th>Test (n=294)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PA Education Program*</td>
<td>No 14</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>49 20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated into/one or several curriculum topics</td>
<td>123 56.1%</td>
<td>Stand-alone lectures</td>
<td>116 55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person/telehealth training</td>
<td>90 64.8%</td>
<td>Other Sources*</td>
<td>58 19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing education courses</td>
<td>1 22.2%</td>
<td>Self-study</td>
<td>11 14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line education</td>
<td>8 13.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The likelihood of a PA providing OH services was 2.8 times higher if PAs who received OH education and PAs practicing in primary/emergency care compared to other specialties.

RESULTS (cont.)

The facilitator most cited as “important” or “very important” was that medical professionals must feel competent to provide OH services followed by the availability of OH education for medical clinicians and reimbursement for OH services.

CONCLUSIONS

- While these results are difficult to generalize due to the low participation rate, the survey provides interesting insights about the integration of OH into clinical practice.
- Almost 36% of PAs received education in OH competencies; however, only 36% had incorporated those competencies into their clinical practice.
- PAs who received OH education and PAs practicing in primary/emergency care were more likely to incorporate OH services in their clinical practice than other PAs.
- The results suggest that training in OH competencies during foundational education is important and that misperceptions within the medical community about the importance of screening for oral disease persist.

The survey results also suggest that despite general interest among policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders in integrating OH with medical services, numerous barriers within delivery systems impede integration.

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OBJECTIVE

- The objectives of this study were to:
  - Assess if prior education in oral health (OH) competencies influenced PAs’ decision to include OH services in clinical practice
  - Evaluate whether PA specialty and setting was a determinant of OH screening activities

This study was conducted by the Oral Health Workforce Research Center (OHWRC) in cooperation with the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA).

The research for this work was supported by funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration.

METHODS

- Study Sample
- Survey Instrument
- Survey Administration

In total, 304 PAs of the 2,402 PAs with valid contact emails and screening services in their current clinical practices. This study examined whether PA specialty and practice setting were determinants of oral health competencies impacted PAs’ decision to include oral health services in clinical practice.

- Methods: This study used an online survey of a random sample of 2,500 graduates from 166 ARC-PA accredited education programs in the US in 2014 to ask about their education in oral health competencies and provision of oral health assessment and screening services in their current clinical practices. The sample was weighted by the program size. Of the 2,432 graduates with a valid email address, 304 completed the online questionnaire during the 3-month survey period.

- Key Findings: The survey findings suggested that education about oral health in professional education programs is enabling integration of oral health services into clinical practice. The majority of survey respondents (74.5%) reported receiving oral health education during their PA education program.

- After controlling for PA specialty and primary employer, PAs who received education in OH competencies and worked in primary medicine or urgent care were more likely to provide OH services in their clinical practice. More than half of PAs “often” or “always” referred patients to a dental provider when needed, examined & assessed the oral cavity, and screened patients with dental complaints, smoking, and diabetes.

- The majority of PAs who provided any OH services in their clinical practice received education in OH competencies and worked in primary medicine or urgent care. Slightly more PAs who provided OH services also worked in inpatient settings and were located in urban areas.

- The likelihood of a PA providing OH services was 2.8 times higher if PAs who received OH education and PAs practicing in primary/emergency care compared to other specialties.

- The survey results also suggest that despite general interest among policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders in integrating OH with medical services, numerous barriers within delivery systems impede integration.

REFERENCE