Amplifying Our Collective Voice: Seasoned Derm PA Who Wrote First Prescription Following PA Prescribing Authority Law in Maryland Shares Experience, Advice

An Interview with Esther Cohen, PA-C

Mallory Aycock: We are thankful you agreed to do this interview. I feel we have so much to learn from you and your experiences.

Esther Cohen: I am a seasoned physician assistant (PA) with 49 years of clinical experience; 43 of those years spent in Dermatology.

Mallory Aycock: Wow! That’s incredible. Can you start out by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Esther Cohen: The first PA class graduated from the Duke University program on October 6, 1967. That is why we now celebrate PA Week around October 6th every year to recognize the birth of the PA profession. In 1971, the American Medical Association recommended that PAs be primary care providers to help with the healthcare shortage in the United States at that time.

In the early 1970s, the PA concept was a novel upcoming profession. However, there had been a number of feature articles discussing PAs in Time and Life magazine and on NBC and CBS. They were targeting PAs as a potential solution to the healthcare shortage crisis. This intrigued me to pursue a career in this new exciting profession called Physician Assistant. The Federal government also allocated funding for the development of PA programs which enhanced the PA movement. I graduated from the PA program at Essex Community College, which was associated with Johns Hopkins School of Health Services, in 1974. Nationally there were very few degree programs. In fact, this was a vigorous 24-month associate/certificate program. At the time, it was the only program in Maryland. Now there are six advanced degree programs in Maryland alone.

Mostly male veterans of the Vietnam war with a wealth of medical knowledge and experience who had nowhere to lend their skills were considered excellent candidates for admission. A pilot study was looking at whether female students could “survive” a PA program if they did not have a military background. There were three women, me included, who were able to gain acceptance into the PA program as a result of this study. And, as it turned out, the three of us have all done exceptionally well in our PA careers.

Mallory Aycock: Thank you for sharing that background. And so, when you graduated, did you immediately become a dermatology PA? Or how did you get started as a dermatology PA specifically?

Esther Cohen: Upon graduation, I initially worked in drug abuse treatment program, emergency room and internal medicine settings. I always had a love for dermatology and an understanding of it. I really wanted to concentrate in a specialty where I could be more visual, due to my hearing impairment. Hence, dermatology was a perfect match for me, and I have never looked back.
Mallory Aycock: Thank you for sharing that background. When you graduated, did you immediately become a dermatology PA? How did you get started as a dermatology PA specifically?

Esther Cohen: In 1974 when I first became a PA there were few laws regulating PAs much less delegated prescriptive authority. PAs evaluated and treated their own patients; however, when it came to writing a prescription, PAs waited for the physician to sign the prescription pad. As a workaround at one point there were PAs with pre-sign prescriptions. Of course, the MD Board of Physicians came down on PAs for engaging in this behavior. Needless to say, lack of legislation held us back from providing cost effective access to healthcare.

In 1977, the Maryland Academy of Physician Assistants (MAPA) became incorporated, officially becoming a state chapter of the AAPA. MAPA became the only statewide organization that represents all Maryland PAs interest in a collective voice.

When president in 1993, MAPA submitted its first PA prescribing bill. However, it took us five years to become into law. As a dermatology PA I was so proud to write that very first Maryland PA prescription. A new approved practice delegation agreement including prescription delegation allowed me to write that first prescription on October 1, 1999.

Mallory Aycock: That’s amazing! Why did it take five years?

Esther Cohen: In 1997 the bill was passed only for the inpatient prescribing authority because it was felt that PAs had more supervision in an inpatient setting. Outpatient prescription authority legislation wasn’t passed until 1999.

Mallory Aycock: I can imagine that was a challenging time. I appreciate you sharing that history. I’m learning so much as I’m listening to you, too—some of those things I didn’t know.

Esther Cohen: Before prescriptive authority, it was very difficult to practice. This new generation of PAs—they just assume they will become a PA, practice with autonomy, and write prescriptions. Until they understand our history and obstacles the profession has conquered, they won’t appreciate the value of what is taken for granted today. Regarding other health care professions, the PA profession is still young. Although we have come a long way, we must remain vigilant and ready to tackle any potential obstacles that might hinder our profession’s growth.

Mallory Aycock: I think that’s a great perspective. Do you have any specific advice for derm PAs who are interested in advocacy or leadership or both?

Esther Cohen: I believe that the more you give of yourself, the more you get back in return. Not just changing laws—it’s really all about being involved. Involvement creates an opportunity to network and make new friends. Joining national and state organizations is a good way to get started. The SDPA has a vibrant and active network of state affiliate groups with 11 state affiliates spread out across the United States and three State Liaisons. AAPA has 58 constituent organization chapters. The Maryland Association of
National and state organizations are our collective voice, and it gives us numbers and power. Without that voice, it minimizes our ability to advocate for our profession. It is extremely important to not only join these national professional organizations but also your local groups. When our membership decreases on the national or local level, it weakens our voice in both organizations. We can’t depend on others to defend us. PA is our profession, and we must stand up for it ourselves.

Mallory Aycock: Absolutely. And you’re such a pioneer in that space and helping us build such a strong foundation for the PA profession.

Esther Cohen: Becoming involved either in the national or state organizations is a great way to continue to grow the PA profession. Both national organizations of the American Academy of Physician Associates (AAPA) and Society of Dermatology Physician Assistants (SDPA) have leadership development programs, giving us strength and a unified voice.

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Mallory Aycock: That’s true. Thank you for sharing that advice. It’s a good reminder for us all to ensure we are maintaining involvement in these organizations. What do you feel is the biggest evolution in our profession?

Esther Cohen: The biggest evolution nationally is moving forward with optimal team practice. Establishing collaborative practice team-based medicine without burdensome administrative constraints is vital to the survival of our profession.

Mallory Aycock: What do you feel is the biggest upcoming challenge for us as PAs or as Derm PAs specifically?

Esther Cohen: I guess it gets back to optimal team practice—to be able to act as a cohesive group in the United States with the same laws for practice everywhere. The ultimate outcome of this will be the PA licensure compact, which will facilitate multistate licensing for PAs practicing in different states. By joining this compact, it will reduce the burden of maintaining multiple licenses.

Mallory Aycock: Absolutely. Could you share any advice you would like to give to derm PAs in general?

Esther Cohen: Take the opportunity to volunteer. Some suggestions are your state delegate’s office, provide free services at community health fairs, school career days, or any activity that interests you. Network with your peers so you are aware of what’s going on in the profession, your specialty, and also in your state. This will also help the community to get to know a PA on a personal level and can possibly help you to advocate for legislation impacting PAs. Keep up to date with the changing field of dermatology. Every day, new things are being developed, including new treatments. Use evidence-based information to guide your clinical decisions and listen to your patient.

Mallory Aycock: I love that. Thank you so much for sharing it. Any final thoughts that you could share with us?

Esther Cohen: We need more PAs in leadership roles and at the head of the table to have a voice—not to end up on the menu!

Mallory Aycock: Yes! That’s so inspiring to me, and I know that you will inspire our readers as they read our discussion today. I think what you’ve done in the past has helped build such a strong foundation for us as PAs, and we’re just so appreciative of your work, your continued work, and the wisdom that you shared today. I’m grateful you spent this time talking with me today.

Esther Cohen: It’s been wonderful to watch the transformation of our profession. Our title has become...Continued on page 44
a household term. In the United States it is now the top 10 professions. I’ve been blessed to participate with my colleagues in every battle and legislative victory. As a practicing clinical PA the highlight of my career is to be able to put into practice the new laws that resulted from these activities.

I am still enjoy working part-time in a busy dermatology PA practice in Maryland. I guess I’ll retire when I feel ready.

Mallory Aycock: That’s a great retirement. Well, I’m grateful for your time. And again, I just thank you for all you’ve done for our profession, and I loved hearing your advice and everything you shared today. I’m leaving inspired to find roles in leadership and advocacy for our profession. Thank you for sharing the advice also that we don’t have to start in such large ways; we can be involved in small roles, and that’s still involvement and leadership and advocacy.

Esther Cohen: Every part counts. No one can do it alone. Every person counts. Every voice counts. I believe it’s most important that every PA joins the AAPA, their state organization and every derm PA join the SDPA and their state affiliate because it gives us a collective voice. Without that voice, we can’t go further legislatively, and if our membership numbers are down then it weakens our voice.

Mallory Aycock: Thank you! I just really appreciate all you had to say today. I’m so thankful I got to be the one to interview you. Hearing from you firsthand was a gift.

Esther Cohen: Thank you very much. It’s been my pleasure. I still love being a PA. My personal life journey has changed many times over the years, but the PA profession has only been more rewarding. I still have it in me, and I really enjoy being a PA. I enjoy meeting the younger generation as they enter the profession. They’re different—there extremely competitive, more women, tech savvy skills, and have new IT tools in their toolbox. We are fortunate to have this new generation of talent to join in the ranks of the PA profession.

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