Advocacy for PA Profession Must Be Rooted in What Patients Deserve

By Jennifer M. Orozco, DMSc, PA-C, DFAAPA

During my time as President and Chair of the Board of the American Academy of Physician Associates (AAPA), one of the most frequent questions I have been asked is why I wanted to be a PA.

The question always takes me back to the time in my life when I chose my path in medicine. And the answer is always the same: I had a strong desire and a heartfelt calling to care for people.

Now, more than 20 years later, I know I made the right career decision. As a PA, I have not only been able to provide trusted, quality care to my patients, but I have embraced the call to action to be an advocate for them—to speak up for the essential changes required to meet the needs of a modern healthcare system that cares for everyone, regardless of their ZIP code.

Today, it’s clear that patients need advocates in healthcare; PAs can answer that call.

One of the many learnings from the COVID pandemic is that the U.S. healthcare system has reached a tipping point—a “perfect storm.” We are at the convergence of healthcare workforce shortages, a mental health crisis, a growing aging population, and a rise in chronic diseases like obesity and diabetes.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that over two percent of the healthcare workforce quits every month.\(^1\) Consider that against the fact that today more than 99 million Americans lack adequate access to primary care.\(^2\) Also, the population of people aged 65 and older is projected to reach 80.8 million by 2040, according to the Administration of Community Living.\(^3\)

These numbers show that our country faces a tremendous challenge: Patient demand is outpacing provider supply. Healthcare delivery must evolve to meet these growing needs, and the focus must always be on our patients—the human beings behind the data.

I have learned during my time as a PA advocate that change is hard and often met with resistance. I can attest firsthand to the resistance the PA profession has faced in our efforts to make commonsense policy changes that would lead to greater access to care for patients and stronger healthcare teams to meet increasing demand.

PAs often ask me how to “convince” their physician, nurse practitioner (NP), or other healthcare colleagues to support updates to PA practice laws because PAs “deserve” this. And while we do, I encourage them to instead focus their efforts on patients. Patients are what we have in common, and we all want what is best for them. Advocacy for the PA profession isn’t about what we deserve; it’s about what patients deserve. Patients are where we must keep our focus.

Maintaining the status quo is often the easiest answer, but it isn’t necessarily the right answer—at least not for patients. It is estimated that medical knowledge changes every 73 days.\(^4\) So too must our laws and regulations evolve to ensure that every member of today’s modern healthcare team is able to practice to the fullest extent of their license, their education, and their training. Ensuring that every member of a patient’s team is able to contribute their knowledge, their expertise, their quality care to achieve the best outcome is patient advocacy! And PAs should be proud of their role in carrying this flag.

That is why I am so excited about the new PA brand AAPA launched last year, PAs Go Beyond (https://www.aapa.org/pas-go-beyond/).

Through PAs Go Beyond, we are encouraging and empowering PAs to tell their stories. Your powerful stories are demonstrating through actions and outcomes the value of PAs to individuals and to communities across the country.

By participating in the PAs Go Beyond campaign, you will be an advocate for the profession and the patients you serve every day. You will help elevate the role and relevancy of the profession with our colleagues in healthcare, policymakers, thought leaders, and the media to better understand the value of the PA profession. Won’t you join me in becoming an advocate for this great profession? 😊

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REFERENCES:

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