

Brief Report

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Physician assistants in the United Kingdom: An initial profile of the profession

ABSTRACT Of 165 PAs and PA students in the United Kingdom in December 2010, 127 (77%) responded to a census survey. PAs work in 19 medical and surgical specialties; experienced PAs are more likely to practice in primary care. Prior to PA training, respondents worked in a wide variety of health professions.

Physician assistants (PAs) are health professionals who are licensed to practice medicine with physician supervision. PAs are trained in the medical model to perform diagnostic and therapeutic services previously performed only by physicians. Studies suggest that quality of care provided by PAs is comparable with physician care and that doctors and patients in the United States, where PAs have practiced for more than 40 years, are highly satisfied with the PA role.^{1,2} More recently, other countries have begun to train and license PAs as well.³

In 2003-2004, a small cohort of experienced American PAs was brought to England to investigate whether the PA role would fit within the National Health Service (NHS). Because the pilot project was deemed successful, several UK universities developed PA training programs.⁴ As of mid-2011, there are three active UK PA programs. Each offers a postgraduate diploma upon completion of a 2-year full-time program. Currently, PAs who practice in the UK include both UK and US graduates. This study characterizes the PA profession in the United Kingdom for the first time.

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Methods The authors developed a survey that asked participants about professional and educational background, demographics, specialty, and scope of practice. The survey was sent via e-mail to all UK PAs and PA students. Notices about the census were also posted on the UKAPA Web site. De-identified data were collected via a Web-based survey tool in January 2011. The study design and survey instruments were granted exempt status by the research ethics boards of George Washington University and the UK NHS.

The UKAPA, the PA programs, and the UK board responsible for administering the certification examination were able to identify 71 people who are qualified to practice as PAs in the UK and 94 PA students. All survey respondents were classified as "students" or "graduate PAs" based on their student status as of December 31, 2010.

Results The majority of PAs are female (75%). Their mean age is 37 years, and they are drawn from at least 10 different ethnicities (Table 1). PAs are practicing across England, with concentrations of PAs near training programs (Figure 1). Three-quarters of respondents (76%) had health care or scientific research experience prior to training as a PA (Figure 2).

PAs are employed in 19 different medical and surgical specialties. Those who graduated before 2009 are more likely to work in general practice (Table 2). Practicing PAs were asked about their daily clinical activities. All reported "taking a medical history" and "performing

physical examinations." Most reported performing patient education (97%), interpreting ECGs (81%), and conducting psychiatric assessments (76%). Surgical and emergency medicine PAs reported performing invasive procedures such as central line insertion, lumbar puncture, and intubation.

Discussion The UK PA role is beginning to develop. PAs are being used in a wide variety of specialties throughout the country. A unique aspect of PA training is that all PAs are trained as generalist medical providers and are required to pass a generalist medical examination every 6 years to retain certification. However, some specialists have recognized the benefits of hiring generalist-trained providers and providing on-the-job specialty training, as a high proportion of the newly graduated UK-trained PAs are working in secondary care.

Why new UK graduates select specialty practice is unclear. Some possible explanations from the US PA literature include greater availability of specialty posts and higher salaries in specialty care.⁵ As it is possible for PAs to change specialties throughout their careers, further research may reveal whether specialty choice changes across the professional lifespan of the UK PA.

Conclusion The UK PA profession is in its infancy but shows potential to be a flexible source of medical care provision in the United Kingdom as it has been in the United States. Further UK-based research should seek to understand whether PAs are accepted by British doctors and patients and whether clinical outcomes for patients cared for by a PA-doctor team are comparable to outcomes when care is provided only by a doctor. **JAAPA**

Richard W. Dehn, MPA, PA-C, department editor

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TABLE 1. Demographics of physician assistants in the United Kingdom

	PAs	PA students
Sex		
Female	39 of 49 (76%)	56 of 75 (75%)
Prefer not to answer	2	0
Age		
Mean age (y)	37	29
Median age (y)	33	25
Age range (y)	24-61	21-56
Ethnicity		
Asian	1	15
Black	5	8
White	40	41
Mixed	0	2
Other	3	7
Prefer not to answer	2	3

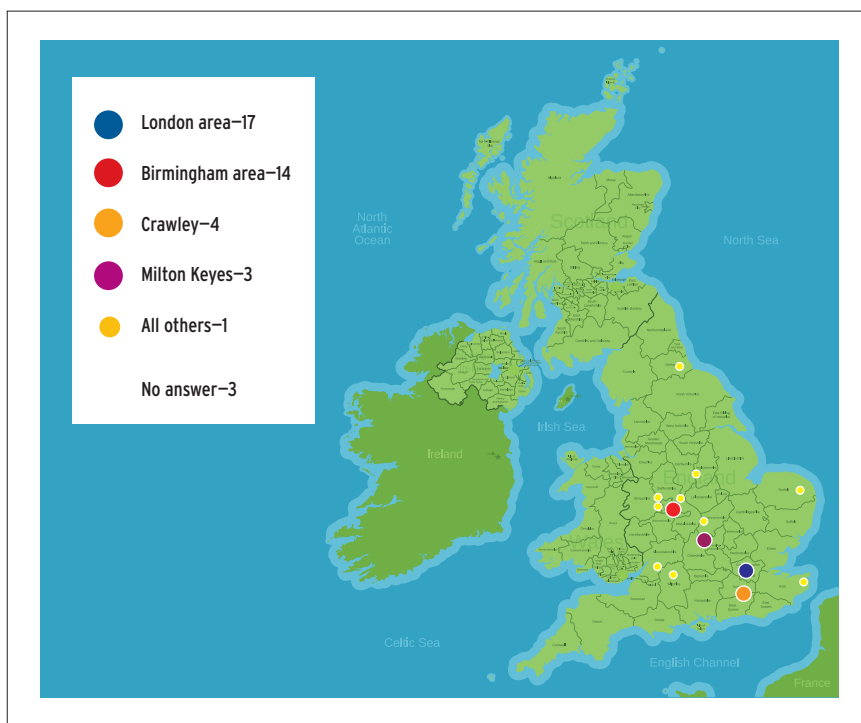


FIGURE 1. Location of PAs in the United Kingdom, 2011

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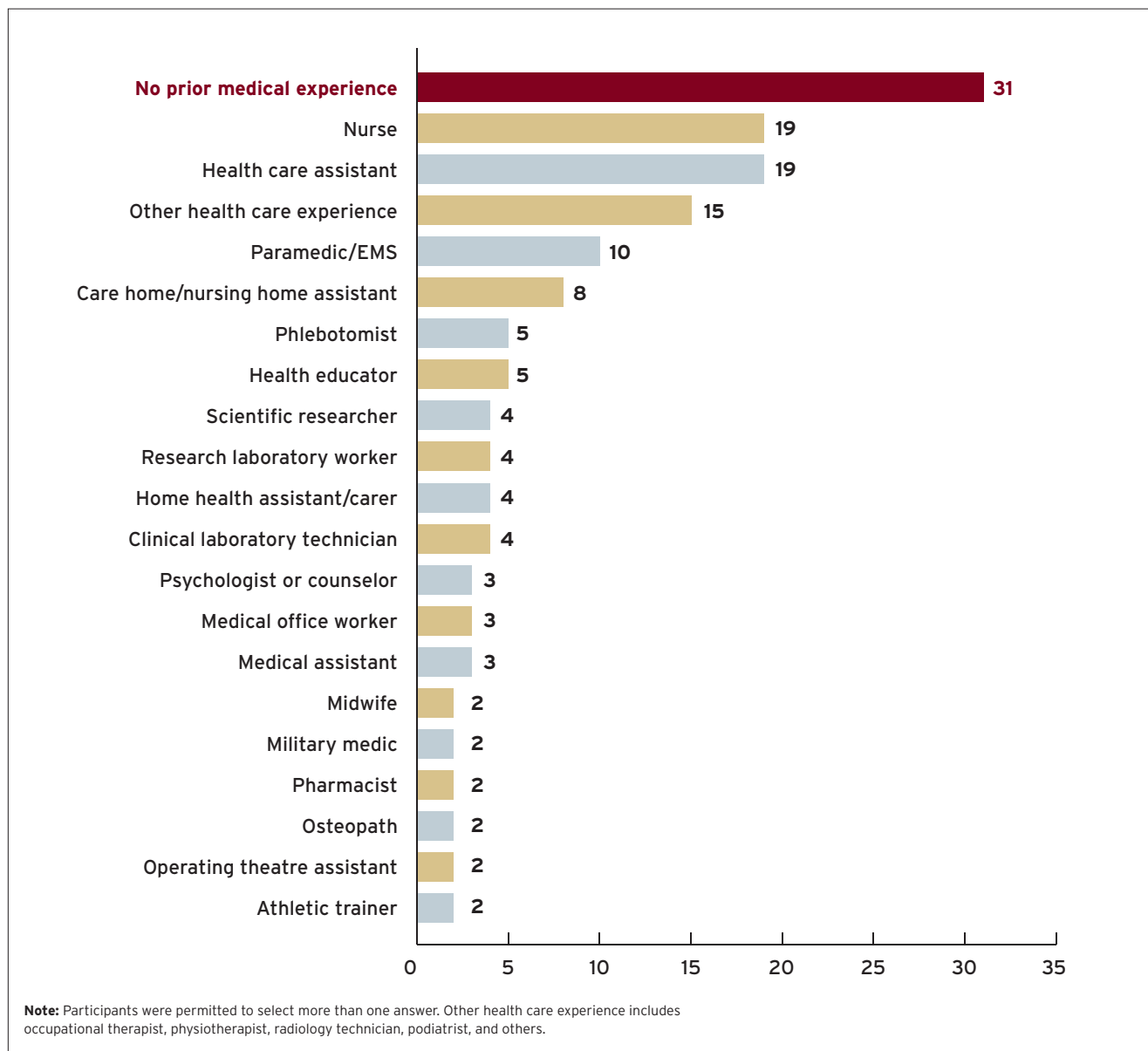


FIGURE 2. Previous clinical experience of UK PAs and PA students

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TABLE 2. Specialties in which UK physician assistants practice

Primary and secondary specialties	All PAs	Graduated before 2009	Graduated in 2009 or 2010
Generalist specialties			
General practice	20	16	4
Emergency medicine	11	5	6
Educator	5	4	1
Adult specialties			
General internal medicine	3	1	2
Cardiology	3	1	2
Gastroenterology	2	0	2
Rehabilitation medicine	2	2	0
Critical care	1	1	0
Endocrinology	1	1	0
Medical oncology	1	0	1
Psychiatry	1	0	1
Respiratory medicine	1	1	0
Pediatric specialties			
Pediatric critical care	3	0	3
General pediatrics	2	2	0
Pediatric oncology	2	1	1
Surgical specialties			
Trauma and orthopedics	2	0	2
Orthopedics	1	0	1
Neurosurgery	1	0	1
Vascular surgery	1	0	1

Note: The number of specialties is greater than the number of respondents because some PAs work in multiple specialties.