Knowledge and Perceptions of Undergraduates Regarding the Physician Assistant Profession

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Abstract

Purpose: Physician assistants (PAs) are healthcare providers licensed to practice medicine under physician supervision in the United States. Despite the increasing popularity and utility of the profession, knowledge of the role of PAs remains scarce among many segments of the population. The purpose of this study was to determine the knowledge and perceptions of the PA profession among undergraduate students, as well as what factors are associated with better knowledge and perception of the profession.

Methods: Using a cross-sectional survey, information was gathered regarding knowledge and perception of PAs. A total of 364 students were surveyed from randomly selected undergraduate classes at a Connecticut public university.

Results: Knowledge scores were significantly higher (p<0.05) in older students, female students, those with plans to pursue a healthcare career, those majoring in health and human services, and those satisfied with care received from a PA. Significantly better perceptions (p<0.05) of PAs were found in older students, those with plans for a future career in healthcare, those majoring in health and human services, those who received prior care from a PA, and those who were satisfied with prior care from a PA. After a short educational intervention, improvements in perceptions were statistically significant (p<0.001).

Conclusions: This study identifies areas of needed improvement in knowledge and perception of PAs and also provides impetus for educational and marketing-based interventions to improve knowledge and perception of the PA profession in the college student population.

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of the PA profession among undergraduate students?
2. What is the knowledge of the PA profession among undergraduate students?
3. What factors, demographic or otherwise, are associated with knowledge and perception of the PA profession among undergraduate students?
4. Will a short educational intervention alter perception of the PA profession among undergraduate students, and if so, how?

Instrumentation

The survey, designed specifically for this study, was validated through reviews by a technical expert panel of PA and PHD educators as well as cognitive interviews of college students. Reliability of the knowledge (p = 0.902) and perception (α = 0.924) questions was ensured. The possible knowledge score range was 0-68, while the possible perception score range was 0-4 of 36. The survey was administered before and after a short educational intervention in which students were provided with a one-page handout detailing the role and education of PAs, created with language from the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA).

Discussion

• Though knowledge of some areas of PA practice is substantial, there are many gaps in undergraduate knowledge regarding the profession.
• There was a much improved perception of PAs after a small amount of knowledge regarding the profession was provided to students.
• At baseline, most students knew that PAs could perform tasks typically delegated to a medical assistant such as taking vitals, height, and weight.
• Students were less likely to report thinking that a PA was able to perform more complicated, skillful tasks.
• Though keeping the current name of physician assistant received the most votes, approximately two-thirds of students disagreed that physician assistant was the most appropriate name, and a nearly equal number of students preferred the title of medical practitioner.
• Because there are significant gaps in knowledge of the PA profession among undergraduate students, educational interventions should be developed to target this population.
• Additionally, improving perception is important to enable PAs to practice as autonomous providers within the healthcare field, to continue to encourage bright minds to seek careers in the field, further the growth of the profession, and to enable meaningful legislative change to take place regarding PA scope of practice.
• Future research is needed to determine knowledge and perception of PAs among other populations, to develop effective interventions to improve knowledge and perception, and to decide through data analysis which among various interventions are the most appropriate and least confusing name for the profession going forward.