

PA Project Update

University of Toronto launches PA education program Unique program offers distance learning, electronic portfolios

Tiffany Stowell lives in Thunder Bay and intends to practise in northern Ontario when she completes the physician assistant (PA) education program through the University of Toronto. She has an undergraduate degree in kinesiology and was a physiotherapy assistant in a long-term care home before deciding to switch careers.



Photo by Alex DeOliveira

University of Toronto BScPA students Dhiral Patel, John Stuart Moore, and Lin Zhou take part in a "Sterile Techniques" Lab in the CAE/Michener Simulation Centre.

"I want to become a PA to help increase available health care to our population," says Tiffany. "There are many Canadians without a family doctor and I feel that PAs will help make clinics more efficient—doctors can see more patients with the help of a PA—decreasing wait times and therefore providing more care to more people."

The PA education program at the University of Toronto, which started in January of this year with 24 students, boasts not only a diverse and experienced group of students, but also some innovative approaches to education delivery.

The program uses a blended learning approach, according to Elizabeth Whitmell, Program Manager. Online learning figures prominently, as does problem-based learning. The distance education provides access for students from both urban and rural areas. About 25% of students are from northern Ontario.

"The teachers are absolutely thrilled with how well the students are doing," says Whitmell, who noted that over 100 applications were received for the second-entry degree program. "We know it's a compact, high intensity program, and that historically is the way PA programs are." But she notes that students are taking a leap of faith given that not only is the program new, but so is the profession.

Students come together for one month each semester for hands-on learning. The students include nurses, massage therapists, chiropractors, kinesiologists, imaging technologists, advanced care paramedics, and international medical graduates. They range in age from their early 20s to their 50s.

As with the McMaster University PA education program, applicants must have successfully completed a minimum of two years of undergraduate work to apply. At U of T there is also a requirement to have experience as a health care professional, with a minimum of 1,680 hours of direct patient contact in a professional setting.

The program, delivered in collaboration with the Michener Institute and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine Ontario, together forming the

Consortium of PA Education, grants a Bachelor of Science Physician Assistant (BScPA) degree.

The PA curriculum ensures that students graduate with the competencies outlined

in the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants National Competency Profile, and the programs must meet Canadian Medical Association standards for accreditation. With successful completion, graduates are eligible for national certification as a PA.

Faculty and instructors include PAs who have participated or are currently working in the Ontario PA Initiative, as well as a graduate of the Canadian Forces PA program. Subject matter experts at U of T help deliver courses such as anatomy and physiology, making it clinically relevant for PA students.

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T H E P A P R O J E C T T E A M



PA Ed Program (cont'd)

Dhiral Patel was an operating room nurse at Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital before she joined the program. She was inspired by PA friends in the U.S., and particularly likes how PAs work alongside nurses and other allied care providers to improve access to care. "I really like the team aspect, the collaboration, and the medical model," she says.

The program includes an observership in Year One which sends PAs out in the field gaining exposure to practice, generally about four hours per week for 25-30 weeks, in at least two different settings. Year Two is focused on clinical education, with a few concurrent didactic courses. All students will gain clinical experience in both Northern and Southern Ontario, regardless of their home location, allowing for a more thorough understanding of health care processes across Ontario.

Other noteworthy aspects of the program include having electronic portfolios and access to the university's standardized patient program, says Sharona Kanofsky, Academic Coordinator for the program. The standardized patient program enables an early focus on developing communications skills.

Kanofsky was a PA in the demonstration project at Baycrest Hospital before embarking on maternity leave and subsequently joining U of T. A Canadian, Kanofsky trained in the U.S. and practised as a PA in the specialties of neurology and gynecology.

She says the U of T program is of a very high caliber. "It's competency based, really focused on demonstrating being able to do things PAs need to be able to do. So it's not just knowledge based but performance based," she says.

Second PA Day Another Hit!

Aside from being a great networking opportunity, the second annual "PA Day" offered a chance for PAs to share experiences and identify challenges going forward.

The PA Professional Education Day, hosted by the Centre for the Evaluation of Health Professionals Educated Abroad, brought together 61 PAs and 29 supervising physicians. The event was held in Toronto on November 29 and 30, 2009. It kicked off with an evening networking reception and presentation by the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants and the Physician Assistants' Certification Council (PACC) on the new National Competency Profile and its implications for PA practice.

The following morning saw interactive large group sessions on communication, charting, and effective team practice, as well as a presentation on the evolution of the PA role in Ontario by Dr. Joshua Tepper, Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Human Resources Strategy Division, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. In the afternoon, facilitated small group sessions enabled participants to share their experiences with delegation, team work, and communication.

Continuing education credits for participants was a new element for PA Day. These were granted by PACC, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and the College of Family Physicians of Canada.

Comments and evaluations of the event were overwhelmingly positive. Opportunities were also identified. There is continued interest in ongoing education—with clinical or specialty-specific content—and networking opportunities for PAs. As well, participants flagged a continuing need to clarify and communicate the PA role to other health professionals, patients, and the public.

Improving channels of communication was another suggestion, so that front-line staff is aware of project decisions, information, and available resources. For example, not all PAs or supervising physicians were aware that sample medical directives are available. Finally, participants emphasized their desire to be kept informed about the future of the PA role in Ontario, specifically regarding regulation, any ongoing supports, and future job opportunities.

Online networking info for PAs

All PAs involved in the demonstration projects are encouraged to check out the Ontario Hospital Association project web site <https://whiteboard.oha.com>.

The site contains project documents (including, for example, sample medical directives used at various sites), bulletin boards for networking and discussion, and a media room that has the latest coverage of the initiative.

It's a great space to share documents, connect with others in the project, or just keep up on the latest project news.

If you need help accessing this password protected site, please contact Andreanna Grabham (agrabham@oha.com).

From the Field

In this issue we chat with Robert McDougall, a PA who joined the Emergency Room at Ross Memorial Hospital in Lindsay, as part of the expansion into ER sites.

When Robert McDougall came on staff at Ross Memorial in October 2009, he felt like he was taking on a long established role, despite the fact that it was brand new.

His supervising physician Dr. Dawn Reid had laid the groundwork, briefing his colleagues on the new role and how Robert would work with colleagues, and moving quickly when it came to developing medical directives. The local newspaper also ran a story introducing him to the community.

“It’s what I expected and then some,” he says, noting that staff has embraced him and the team is stronger than ever. Ross Memorial is one of 20 sites participating in the Emergency Department demonstration project, which is focused on reducing wait times and maintaining full emergency service coverage.

Robert, 46, sees patients with issues like eye problems, colds and flus, back pain, headache, bladder infections, and chest infections, to name a few. He says his patients are happy to be seen quickly and have their tests done quickly.

Robert joined the Canadian Forces in 1983 as a medical assistant and did six tours overseas. In 2001 he completed a PA course, and then spent five years on war ships on the west coast. After retiring to Trenton, he joined Ross Memorial, where his mother did her nursing training. Having grown up in nearby Beaverton, “it’s sort of a coming home, a giving back to the community.”

The biggest difference in his civilian PA role, he says, is dealing with both a younger and a geriatric population, given that CF patients were aged 18-55, predominantly male, and fit.

Dr. Reid says she is “extremely happy” with Robert’s addition to the team. “Robert has made a significant impact on the service the team is able to provide our patients,” she notes. “His

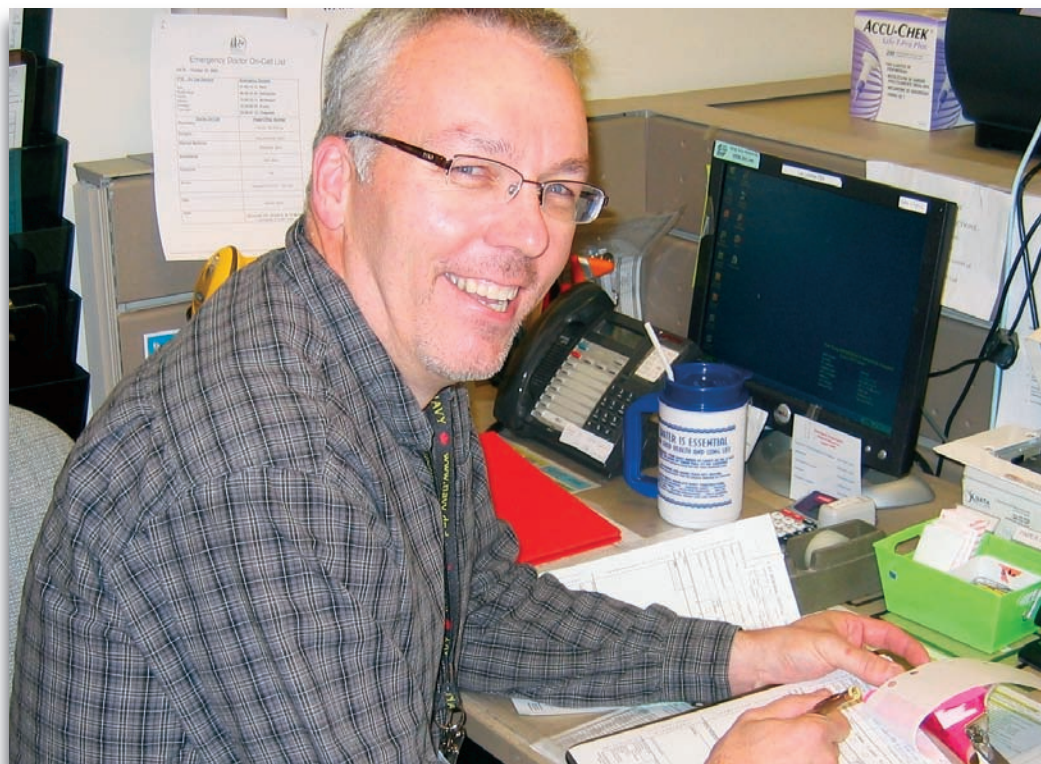
“Robert has made a significant impact on the service the team is able to provide our patients.”

experience as a PA in the Canadian military enables him to assist with the care and disposition of less complex patients. These patients account for roughly 50% of visits to the ED every day.”

In fact, a data review revealed that since Robert came on board (and up to February 2010) the team has succeeded in saving 5,945 wait time hours for patients. While the hospital implemented some successful initiatives to streamline case management, the most significant and consistent performance gains are seen on the shifts staffed by Robert; the ER wait time is down to one hour from six hours, and

the Left Without Being Seen rate has dropped from 6% to 3.29%.

“There’s a definite role in Ontario health care for PAs,” says Robert. “We have a great close collaboration with the doctors. We’re a link that makes a big difference. Every patient I’ve dealt with seems to appreciate what we do.”



Robert McDougall, PA in the Emergency Room at Ross Memorial Hospital in Lindsay.

Family Health Teams Welcome PAs

The primary care PA demonstration project has expanded to include 19 Family Health Teams. The first hire came on board in December 2009, and 16 PAs were practising by April.

FHTs are comprised of a range of health care professionals who work collaboratively to provide family health care services, as well as chronic disease management, disease prevention, and health promotion. A variety of FHTs are involved in the project, including community-led FHTs and physician-sponsored FHTs.

The goal of the project is to increase access and decrease the number of unattached patients, according to Susan Hache, Senior Program Consultant, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, who is leading the FHT expansion project. "It's also aimed at preventing ER visits, improving capacity for chronic disease management and health promotion, as well as improving coordination of care," she says.

PAs are being integrated with the help of the Association of Ontario Health Centres (AOHC), whose staff are leading sessions to foster the integration of the PA into the interprofessional team, by supporting the team to understand the role of the PA and facilitating a positive change management process.



Members of the South East Toronto Family Health Team take part in a session to help integrate the PA into the interprofessional team.

From left to right (back row): Sophie Bart, Project Manager, AOHC; Ajai Rooprai, chiroprapist; Ruth Cimbron, clinical support team member; Serena Beber, registered dietitian; Irene Querubin, clinical support team member; Jennifer Lake, clinical pharmacist; Julie Seale, registered dietitian; Tiffany Carroll, registered dietitian; Dona Bowers, physician/clinic coordinator, AOHC.

Front row: Jason Santos, registered nurse; Dr. Louisa Huband (supervising physician); Hala Elimam, PA; Karen Lilley, clinical support team member; Marianne Surbeck, Nurse Practitioner.

The AOHC engaged Dona Bowers, physician/clinic coordinator, and Angela Cassell, physician assistant, both from Somerset West Community Health Centre, to work with Sophie Bart, AOHC Project Manager, on this project. To date, the team has conducted sessions with clinical and administrative staff at eight FHTs.

Through these sessions, the team has been able to share learnings from CHCs that have led the way as the first primary care setting involved in the project. The team is also conducting teleconferences and webinars for FHT physicians supervising PAs, to help orient them to their roles as supervisors and to available delegation mechanisms.

The physician assistant role was announced in May 2006 with the launch of HealthForceOntario, the government's health human resources strategy. The goal of HealthForceOntario is to give the people of Ontario access to the right number and mix of qualified healthcare providers, now and in the future.

The PA initiative is being led by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ontario Medical Association. They are joined by the Ontario Hospital Association and the Association of Ontario Health Centres in introducing physician assistants to healthcare teams at sites across the province.

For more information about the PA initiative, go to www.healthforceontario.ca/pa