

## **Ontario's Physician Assistant Initiative: An Overview**

**May 2009**

The Physician Assistant (PA) 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 health providers, now and in the future.

The Physician Assistant Initiative is being co-led by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) and the Ontario Medical Association (OMA). A Physician Assistant Implementation Steering Committee made up of employers, educators, regulators, and health professionals has been guiding the development, implementation, and evaluation of all PA demonstration projects since January 2007.

The PA role is being introduced to the Ontario health care system through demonstration projects launched in two phases:

### **Phase One: Emergency Department Demonstration Project**

Phase one was a demonstration project in which PAs, nurse practitioners, and acute care nurse specialists joined the emergency department (ED) teams of six hospitals beginning in January 2007. Evaluation findings indicate that the introduction of these three provider roles to ED teams had a positive impact on the delivery of health care services, including shorter wait times, shorter stays in EDs, and fewer patients who left without being seen. The project has now concluded, however due to the positive evaluation findings, these health provider roles were extended beyond this initial demonstration project.

### **Phase Two: Demonstration Projects in Hospitals, Primary Care Settings and Diabetes and Long-Term Care Settings**

The second phase of the PA demonstration consists of a series of projects taking place in various health care settings across the province. As part of this project more than 50 PAs have been introduced into the health care teams of over 20 hospitals. PAs have joined interprofessional teams that include health care providers such as nurses, nurse practitioners, and respiratory therapists. The teams work in general internal medicine, emergency, orthopedics/orthopedic surgery, general surgery, and complex continuing care. This part of the project is being led by the Ontario Hospital Association.

PAs have also been introduced to five Ontario primary care Community Health Centres. Five PAs are working as part of interprofessional teams to provide care in areas that include chronic disease management, addictions and mental health, and pediatric and women's health care. The implementation of this part of the project is being guided by the Association of Ontario Health Centres.

Further, under the guidance of the Ontario Medical Association, six PAs are practising in settings where they are employed directly by a physician or group of physicians. The PAs in this project are working in diabetes care and long-term care patient management settings.

The positive results seen in the demonstration projects presently underway prompted the MOHLTC to offer current employers the opportunity to extend PA contracts up to the end of March 2011. As well, a new two-year expansion of the hospital demonstration project is underway that will see 20 additional PAs joining 20 Emergency Department sites around the province. Efforts are now underway to recruit PAs to fill these positions as soon as possible.

Finally, up to 20 PAs will be introduced to Family Health Teams (FHTs) in an expansion of the primary care demonstration project. 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.

### **PA Recruitment**

The PAs participating in these demonstration projects include retired graduates of the Canadian Forces Physician Assistant education program, PAs who have been educated and certified in the U.S., and selected International Medical Graduates (IMGs) who complete a PA competencies-based assessment and integration process.

IMGs were included because the Ontario government recognized that some IMGs possess the competencies required to practise as PAs and would be interested in applying their knowledge and skills to this role. As well, because there are relatively few Canadian PAs, recruiting PAs from other jurisdictions and avenues was an innovative way to ensure that Ontario had the PAs required for the demonstration projects.

### **The PA Role in Ontario**

As is the case in the Canadian Forces and in other jurisdictions like the U.S., PAs working in Ontario's demonstration project work under the supervision of a physician, who is responsible for the quality of care that PAs provide to patients.

Additional information about the PA role and required competencies can be found in the document *Defining the Physician Assistant Role in Ontario* on the HealthForceOntario website [www.healthforceontario.ca](http://www.healthforceontario.ca) (key words "competencies").

### **PA Education Program**

McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, has launched the province's first civilian physician assistant education program. The first class of 21 students began the program in September 2008. Graduates of this two-year Bachelor of Health Sciences program will have the skills and competencies necessary to meet Canadian standards and to practise as PAs in Ontario.

### **Evaluation**

The evaluation of the demonstration projects is focused on the physician assistants' impact on quality and quantity of care (wait times/access), team and patient satisfaction, and team recruitment and retention. The results will inform future decisions about the integration of the PA role in Ontario.

### **Contact Information**

For information about the PA role in Ontario visit: [www.healthforceontario.ca](http://www.healthforceontario.ca), keyword search: Physician Assistant