



Physician Associates/Assistants in New Zealand

Physician Associates/Assistants (PAs) are highly skilled medical practitioners who have an advanced medical education. They are trained in a patient centered, team based, medical model. Physician Associates evaluate, diagnose, and treat medical conditions.

History

The Physician Associate/Assistant profession was first developed in the 1960s in the United States as a way to help fill the shortage of primary care physicians and expand access to healthcare. This role was created by doctors. Medical communities in the United States have broadly adopted this healthcare role and there are more than 140,000 certified PAs currently licensed and practicing in the USA. This has significantly helped fill the shortage of primary care providers. Several other countries have also adopted this role including the UK, Canada, and The Netherlands. In these countries, regulation varies and those that are regulated allow PAs to order diagnostic imaging and laboratory studies, as well as prescribe medications and therapies.

How Physician Associates are trained overseas

The Physician Associate degree is a post-baccalaureate degree (most programs are a Masters degree) with at least 2000 hours of clinical training and 2000 hours of didactic coursework. This training focuses on clinical and communication skills in a healthcare team approach. Most programs require at least 1000 hours of health care experience prior to entering the program and most applicants have extensive experience in nursing, paramedic, lab science and many other allied health professions. PAs also must pass a National Certifying exam and re certification exam every 10 years, as well as maintain 100 hours of continuing medical education every 2 years.

Physician Associate history in New Zealand

Physician Assistants started in New Zealand in 2009 with a pilot demonstration to understand the potential contribution of the PA role to the New Zealand healthcare workforce. The first PA pilot from 2009-2010 was completed at Middlemore Hospital with two US-trained PAs and was small but successful. The second pilot began in 2013 when Synergia, an external evaluation company, was commissioned by Health Workforce New Zealand (HWNZ) to undertake an assessment of the introduction of PAs at four New Zealand clinical settings. The *Synergia report* is an evaluation of the Phase II Physician Assistant Demonstrations. The sites included one rural emergency department and three primary care settings.

This second phase was completed in 2015. It included seven US-trained PAs in Tokoroa, Hamilton, and Gore. Evaluations of the demonstrations found that the PAs made valuable contributions to their clinical settings, there were no clinical safety concerns with patient care, and there was economic benefit in the Physician Associate role.

PAs currently working in New Zealand

At this time in New Zealand, PAs are working closely with their supervising physician(s). PAs order diagnostic testing and treat patients but need to do this under the supervising doctors name. This is based on the current Health Workforce New Zealand guidelines. PAs are working alongside doctors and nurses performing a variety of tasks that complement the medical and nursing teams. They provide patient centered care, working with patients and their whanau to bring reliable healthcare to every kiwi. Currently there are Physician Associates working in general practice and urgent care in rural and semi rural locations In Auckland, Hastings, Kaitaia, Te Awamutu, Cambridge, Hamilton, Christchurch and Wellington.

Long Term Goals

As the previous demonstrations showed, the full value of the Physician Associate/Assistant will be met when they have full prescribing and ordering privileges, which registration and regulation of the profession will achieve. This application was submitted to the minister who approved the application to be brought to a parliament vote, this vote is scheduled to happen before the end of 2024.

Training PAs in New Zealand is in early planning stages. This would follow the overseas model of postgraduate academic studies described above and will allow kiwi PAs to be part of the solution in the healthcare crisis.

To find out more about Physician Associates/Assistants

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[New Zealand Physician Associate Society](#)

[NZPAS Facebook page](#)

[American Academy of Physician Assistants](#)

[National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants](#)