Professor Williams

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Reflections of a Physician Assistant

The first time I met Brittany Sumerel, a physician assistant, was at San Diego State University’s Catch the Wave Pre-Health Conference, which is an annual conference dedicated to educating students about the various careers in medicine. According to medical dramas such as *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Private Practice*, women in medicine are depicted to be stern and icy. Brittany, otherwise known professionally as PA-Sumerel, looked more like an actress than a glacial physician assistant with her pixie haircut, musical voice, and natural charisma. When she isn’t baking, reading, or backpacking, PA-Sumerel is treating patients and working hard in hopes of bettering the lives of others.

A physician assistant, also abbreviated as a PA, is a healthcare professional that is able to diagnose, conduct clinical rounds, and develop treatment plans underneath a supervising physician. According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, or the AAPA, the need for physician assistants increased over 300 percent from 2011 to 2014 and is considered by Forbes to be one of the most “promising” American jobs (“The Importance of PAs”).

Though originally from San Diego, PA-Sumerel completed her bachelor’s degree at UCLA where she majored in neuroscience. For four years, she conducted research as an undergraduate assistant for clinical trials when she came to the realization that patient interaction was a growing priority to her career aspirations. Drawn to the flexible work schedule, ability to switch specialties, and overall “better quality of life” compared to that of a doctor, she applied to graduate school and was eventually accepted into the USC Keck School of Medicine for the Physician Assistant Program. PA-Sumerel currently works at St. Paul’s Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) here in San Diego, a program dedicated to managing healthcare for seniors to promote independent living.

PA-Sumerel, along with St. Paul’s healthcare staff and administration, begin their day at 8:00 AM to discuss patient care and treatment plans. After the meeting, PA-Sumerel meets with patients who are either annual follow-ups or first-time visits until her shift ends at 4:30 PM. This includes check-ups, ordering labs, and prescribing medication. The most rewarding part of her career is “finally gaining a patient’s trust” who was initially skeptical towards her. PA-Sumerel’s patients are generally an older population that occasionally feels apprehensive towards the physician assistant profession. This young profession was established in 1965 due to a shortage of physicians and is still unheard of to some patients in this day and age. Though appearing credible poses as a challenge, PA-Sumerel perseveres to become a team with her patients, a trait she believes is crucial for providing optimal care in the medical field.

In medicine, charting is crucial for communication between staff. There are three main components to charting: data, interpretation, and action. Data includes physical exams, vitals, and lab results. Interpretation of the data is the health provider’s personal analysis, while the action is the process intended to complete the treatment. Recording data is crucial or else the examination or tests are considered non-existent. Writing is a useful tool in both education and medicine as PA-Sumerel admits strong writing abilities are what granted her thousands of dollars in scholarships. At St. Paul’s, PA-Sumerel also creates educational materials for her patients which includes pamphlets on certain diseases written at a comprehensible, seventh grade reading level. The purpose of these pamphlets is to educate her patients on the treatment of certain medical conditions so that their quality of life may be improved.

Writing in medicine also features SOAP notes, which are a beneficial form of patient data documentation. The SOAP acronym stands for four components: subjective, objective, assessment, and plan. The subjective component features the patient’s brief history including symptoms or severity of pain. The objective component includes data that is to be obtained or measured including vital signs, height and weight, and lab results. The assessment component is the provider’s medical diagnosis, while the plan component is the method the provider will take to ensure the diagnosis is completed. The plan component can consist of ordering tests or procedures and prescribing medication.

The purpose of SOAP notes apart from communication within staff includes serving as a device for billers and audits. Billers can determine the cost and level of complication of a procedure from the provider’s notes. Audits take random samplings of notes to ensure illegal activity is not ongoing, such as the prescription of unnecessary drugs. SOAP notes can also be used as evidence in courtrooms and to prevent lawsuits against healthcare providers.

Though a little over 50 years old, the PA profession is rapidly growing with a predicted growth rate of 30% from 2014-2024, while the average growth rate of jobs is seven percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics). PA-Sumerel’s advice to students is to gain hands-on experience before applying to graduate school. Medicine is a career where life experience is necessary for understanding the complexities of science and patient care. PA-Sumerel states that the average candidate for physician assistant school is approximately 27 years old. It is quite unlikely for an undergraduate student to enter PA school immediately after graduation. The courses in graduate school are rigorous and taxing, but PA-Sumerel says, “You can’t learn everything the first time you come across new material. Every time I read through new material, I think that it’s just one more chance for my brain to pick up something new.” She highlights the importance of students needing to “take it easy on themselves” when met with challenges. After all, physician assistants and students are only human.

PA-Sumerel also advises students to remind themselves why they began their journey in medicine. She reflects on her experience volunteering at a free clinic in Los Angeles, which “reinvigorated” her and provided her with a sense of purpose. She also stresses the importance of having a strong support system throughout graduate school. PA school is a time of intense studying, and surrounding yourself with people who ground you can help both emotionally and spiritually. One prediction that students can expect in the future from the AAPA is the push for physician assistants to not have legal ties to a physician supervisor. PAs would still work on physician-led teams, but the physician would not have to constantly supervise them, which promotes efficiency and cuts labor costs.

With the prestige of medicine comes pressing matters of morality. Dealing with patient pain is the most difficult part of PA-Sumerel’s job. Some patients come to medical centers in search of hard drugs, such as morphine. With her knowledge and expertise, she understands the drugs they seek will not benefit them in the long run, and inaccurately prescribing them could also put her license at risk. Though she still wishes to help, she must find a way to manage their pain in a more practical way. PA-Sumerel’s compassion for her career is not affected by the burdens that emerge when distinguishing a patient’s difficult requests from the Hippocratic oath of “do no harm.” When asked if the reality of her job met her perceived expectations, she laughed and without skipping a beat said, “Yes. It’s amazing.”

Works Cited

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