ABSTRACT

Purpose: Over the past 30 years, physician assistants (PAs) have demonstrated that they are an integral component of today’s modern delivery of health care. However, there still is some uncertainty within the public as to what exactly a PA is, what they can or cannot do, and how they are educated. Since there have not been definitive studies performed to evaluate the public’s perception of PAs since the early 1970s, we wanted to determine how people view PAs today now that there are over 50,000 physician assistants in practice. This study aims to determine what the general population knows about PA education and credentialing, where they have seen PAs in practice, and how comfortable they would be with PAs performing specific procedures.

Methods: The population of this study consisted of volunteers, age 18 years or older, recruited from around the country. All participants received a survey either online or via hardcopy. The first part of the survey included questions regarding the participant’s age, gender, race, education, and current state of residence. It also included questions on prior healthcare experience, prior contact with PAs, and questions regarding their knowledge of PA education and credentialing. The second part consisted of statements regarding how willing and comfortable the participants would be having PAs perform specific tasks. Associations between willingness to see a PA, and gender, age, area of residence, race, and education will be analyzed using analysis of variance, t-tests, and correlation coefficients. The level of significance was at $P < 0.05$.

Results: There were 496 respondents to the survey. Those variables which were statistically significant regarding the participant’s knowledge score were education level ($p > 0.001$), health care experience ($p > 0.001$), whether they believed they knew what a PA was ($p > 0.001$), and prior exposure to a PA ($p > 0.001$). The variables that were statistically significant for willingness scores were age ($p > 0.001$), ethnicity ($p > 0.001$), prior healthcare experience ($p > 0.001$), and perceived knowledge of the PA profession ($p > 0.001$). The overall willingness score of this study when compared to the 1972 study by Litman, demonstrated a greater willingness to have healthcare provided by PAs among 2005 participants (4.815 vs. 4.614, $p = 0.005$).

Conclusions: There have been no definitive studies performed to evaluate the public’s perception of PAs since the early 1970s. Since then physician assistants have become an integral component of the health care system. However, there are still patients who are reluctant to see a PA, do not know what a PA is, or their scope of practice. Now that PAs are being used more often in ever increasing roles, it is important to determine how people view PAs today and how that has evolved. This will allow PAs the opportunity to see where misinformation has occurred and to be able to better focus education and awareness in these areas.