

## **The Physician Assistant Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario**

### **A Commentary**

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#### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed our society and also had a profound impact on the way we practice medicine as Physician Assistants (PA). PAs have played an integral role in caring for patients and adapting to the rapidly changing landscape over the last few months. As the Ontario leadership team of the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants (CAPA), we have had the privilege of hearing first-hand accounts of how frontline Ontario PAs have been battling this pandemic and the critical role(s) they play on the teams they work in. In this commentary, we reflect on our experiences and discuss some of the key challenges we faced during the initial stages of our COVID-19 response in Ontario.

### **The Physician Assistant response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario**

In January 2020, as everyone anxiously watched China's response to a "novel" coronavirus, we prepared for what we feared may become the next global pandemic (1). Shortly after, on January 25, 2020, Canada identified its first positive case of SARS-COV-2 (2). Canada's healthcare community, including Physician Assistants (PA), working on the frontlines, prepared with their teams to battle the virus. We heard stories from PAs in Emergency Departments (ED), working to develop redeployment and on-boarding procedures, in preparation for potential staffing shortages. We heard from PAs in Family Medicine, rapidly adapting to create a seamless pathway for their patients to access high-quality virtual care. We heard from PAs in long-term-care facilities working to create policies that would protect the most vulnerable individuals in our population. PAs in other specialties also shared their stories of redeployment, taking on additional responsibilities and stepping up to fill gaps in care during the pandemic.

As the clock continued to tick, we saw a steady increase in COVID19 cases followed by the strategic shut down of our municipalities (2,3). Similar to what had unfolded in the preceding months across the world, Canadians were asked to abide by the rules of "lockdown", to stay at home and only to leave for essential needs (3). Panicked Canadians took the grocery stores in an attempt to stockpile resources needed for daily living, and empty shelves became a common sighting (4). In addition to the "normal panic," PAs and other frontline healthcare providers were asked to modify our routines,

learn as much as possible about this new illness and equip ourselves with the knowledge to fight and protect our communities. Numerous PAs stepped up to serve on COVID-19 steering committees and working groups in order to stay informed of the rapidly evolving rules and regulations concerning our patients and the general population.

The PAs in Ontario were quick to adapt. Many working in subspecialty settings had to swiftly adjust to working from home, providing virtual care to patients who would otherwise be stranded. Others were members of clinics that shut down temporarily as a result of the restrictions put forward by the government to mitigate the spread of COVID19. Many of these PAs actively sought out opportunities in high-needs settings such as in Intensive Care Units, EDs and on inpatient General Internal Medicine floors. Many Ontario hospitals began to recognize the unique training and versatility of PAs and started to capitalize on our skillset to help fill the increased gaps in care.

As the number of COVID19 patients continued to increase, PAs redeployed to COVID assessment centers. In many Toronto hospitals, PAs continue to be responsible for the assessment and management of acutely ill COVID19 patients referred from assessment centers due to “red-flag” symptoms. Infectious Disease PAs actively assessed and treated COVID19-infected patients on various hospital units (5). Even if not directly involved with the initial assessment and management of potential COVID19 patients, we heard countless stories from our colleagues about the virus’s impact on their practice and lives. Many surgical PAs described their experiences with managing COVID19 positive patients with an underlying surgical issue. ED PAs continued to provide care across the continuum of disease and also managed critically ill patients due to inadequate access to primary care or as a result of delayed care due to fears of coming to the ED. Others in specialty care worked to maintain a high quality of care despite the restrictions and changes in effect as a result of COVID19.

In addition to what is now considered the “typical” struggles during a pandemic, PAs across Canada faced numerous political challenges in this unprecedented time. Specifically, in Ontario, despite the growing number of PAs, many positive PA-related experiences, journal articles and evidence supporting the tremendous work that we do, PAs were amongst the group of frontline workers overlooked by the Ontario provincial government in consideration for Pandemic Pay (6). This was, regrettably, not to our surprise. We are unfortunately accustomed to being the “new kids on the block” and often overlooked by the Ministry and health officials. As a result, PAs in Ontario came together like never before, talking to news outlets, promoting our work on social media platforms, and utilizing our most prominent advocates - our employers and physician supervisors, to speak about the amazing work we are doing (7). Despite our efforts, we were not added to the list of eligible workers for pandemic pay. Regardless of this small setback and a result of the efforts of the Ontario PA community, the people of Ontario, our colleagues and our patients recognized this oversight and the tremendous work that PAs are doing on the frontlines.

We have never been prouder to be practicing PAs as we work on the frontlines, to battle this pandemic. We know that soon we will look back at this period, as the time where PAs in Ontario stepped up to the plate and again proved their worth. Now more than ever, it is evident that PAs have become a critical component of the intricate health systems we serve. This is our time, and it is an honour to be serving on the frontlines with all of you. The future is bright for PAs in Ontario and across Canada.

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