Medical Xpress

The physician assistant will see you now

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(HealthDay)—One of the key members of your health-care team might not be a doctor or a nurse, but a physician assistant.

A physician assistant—or PA—is a specialist with training to fill gaps in primary care, not only in rural communities, but also in busy practices in other areas. If you call your doctor's office with an urgent need, a PA

might be the professional who can see you right away.

The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) defines a PA as a medical professional who works as part of a team with a doctor. Physician assistants have three years of generalized training with exposure to many areas of medicine. They are graduates of accredited educational programs that include classroom instruction and clinical rotations, and they're nationally certified and state-licensed to practice medicine with the supervision of a physician.

The AAPA is pushing to change the requirement that a PA have a set agreement with a doctor in order to practice, which could expand the availability of health-care services in the years to come.

Besides primary care offices, some PAs work alongside surgeons and have roles in both outpatient and inpatient facilities. You also may find a PA in specialty practices, such as in a cardiologist's office.

The extent to which a PA is involved with patients is often determined by the practice's supervising doctor. The PA's duties can include doing physical exams, making diagnoses, prescribing treatment, ordering tests and interpreting results. Some PAs go on rounds in hospitals or conduct research.

Many PAs place an emphasis on preventive care and stress the importance of a healthy lifestyle. That means a PA can be your partner in living well and living longer.

More information: The American Academy of Physician Assistants offers a wealth of information on the role of the physician assistant.

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