Frequently Asked Questions about PTA

What is a Physical Therapist Assistant (PTA)?

Physical Therapist Assistants (PTA’s) work as an integral part of a team to provide physical therapy services under the direction and supervision of a licensed physical therapist. The goals of physical therapy include the restoration, maintenance, and promotion of optimal physical function; the promotion of optimal wellness, fitness and quality of life as it relates to movement and health and the prevention of the onset, symptoms and progression of impairments, functional limitations, and disabilities that may result from disease, disorders, conditions or injuries. (APTA, 2003).

What does a PTA do?

PTA’s strive to improve function, relieve pain, improve mobility and increase ability. They do this through a wide variety of hands-on treatments and modalities. What PTA’s do depends on the setting in which they work. A PTA working in a school setting may help with seating, gait training, improving motion, mobility and posture. A PTA in a hospital may treat patients following a stroke, burn patients, a shoulder replacement, or a patient recovering from a hip fracture all in one day. Outpatient PTA’s in an orthopedic or sports medicine settings work with acute injuries to active people. PTA’s work in long term care settings with geriatric patients, rehabilitation centers that specialize in head and spinal trauma, pediatric centers and fitness facilities. Each setting is different and a PTA may move from one setting to another as their competencies and career progresses.

Where do they work?

PTA’s work in wide variety of settings dependent on their area of interest, their competency and expertise. Hospitals, outpatient clinics, the school system, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, sub-acute facilities, assisted living centers, home health care, fitness centers, private practices, sports medicine centers, cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation centers, aquatics programs, pediatric centers, equine therapy programs and many other specialized areas employ PTA’s.

How does this program prepare me for a career?

The Associate of Applied Science degree program provides students with an opportunity to qualify to take the National Physical Therapy Licensing Examination. This degree program can be completed as a full time student in two years. Students may choose to complete general education requirements on a part time or full time basis prior to admission.

As part of the educational process, students learn and develop skills in the academic setting. Most of the PTA classes have both lecture and laboratory components. Clinical education is an essential component of the PTA curriculum which allows the student to enhance their skills by practicing under the instruction and supervision of a physical therapist in a community clinical setting.
A broad and detailed knowledge of anatomy, a thorough working knowledge of principles of exercise and therapeutic techniques, and a mastery of patient care procedures involved in the handling of the sick and injured are necessary skills of a competent PTA. In addition, since PTAs frequently work with ill or injured people, it is essential that they should demonstrate good personal health, emotional stability, excellent communication skills, confidentiality, honesty, empathy and the ability to get along well with people. These critical skills and traits are introduced, taught, assessed and strengthened throughout the PTA program to best prepare the student for a career success.

**What is the difference between a physical therapist (PT) and a physical therapist assistant (PTA)?**

Physical Therapy is a field of rehabilitation in which therapists evaluate, assess, treat and instruct in the prevention of disability, pain, or movement dysfunction resulting from injury, disease or disability.

Physical Therapists (PTs) are prepared at a post-baccalaureate level, requiring approximately seven years of college culminating in a doctoral degree for entry level practice. The scope of practice for a PT includes evaluation and assessment of the client, diagnosis, development of a prognosis and plan of care, and the provision of interventions.

Physical Therapist Assistants (PTAs) are prepared in Associate Degree programs. An Associate of Applied Science Degree program can be completed as a full time student in two years over 5 semesters, or can be taken on a part time basis for as long as it takes to complete the general education requirements.

A Physical Therapist Assistant (PTA) practices limited physical therapy under the supervision and direction of a physical therapist (PT). PTAs practice as part of a team of health care providers and their scope of practice allows for interactions with patients as well as sophisticated equipment. The PTA carries out and progresses a client through a prescribed plan of care, provides selected procedural interventions, educates clients, caregivers and other health care providers, collects and documents data, and is trained in emergency response.

While some PTAs may choose to continue their education to become physical therapy students, it is important for the PTA student to understand that the technical courses offered in a PTA program differ from those in a PT program and do not necessarily transfer for credit into baccalaureate or post graduate PT programs. Please refer to the American Physical Therapy Association web page for more information at www.apta.org and select "Prospective Students".

**What is the job outlook?**

The job market is excellent. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, national employment growth for PTA’s is expected to increase 46% between the years 2010-2020; much faster and higher than the average for all occupations in the United States. The need for rehabilitation services is projected to grow steadily due in part to the growing elderly and disabled populations.
What are typical salaries for PTA’s?

Nationally, median wages for PTA’s (reported in 2009) were $48,290, but wages can vary depending on the local job market and the type of facility in which the PTA is employed. Median wages in the Susquehanna (Cecil, Harford counties) region have been reported to be slightly higher than the national average at approximately $56,000.