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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Affirming the physician assistant role: moving beyond hierarchical assumptions in medical education

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Affirmer le rôle de l'assistant au médecin : dépasser les présupposés hiérarchiques en formation médicale

Dear Editor,

In Canada's healthcare system, Physician Assistants (PAs) play a vital role in addressing workforce shortages, expanding access to care, and reducing physician burnout.[1] Yet, a troubling assumption persists, that choosing the PA profession represents a career compromise. As Academic Lead for the Master of Physician Assistant Studies program at the University of Manitoba, I frequently hear students share that physician preceptors, while praising their clinical abilities, remark, *"you'd make a great doctor."* Though well intentioned, these remarks reflect the hidden curriculum of health professions education—the implicit message that the MD role is the ultimate professional aspiration.

The PA profession is not a consolation prize. Canada's accredited PA programs are highly competitive, attracting qualified applicants who deliberately choose this profession. After completing 52 weeks of didactic training, students undertake 48 weeks of core clinical rotations exceeding 2,000 hours, aligned with CanMEDS-PA competencies, and mirroring that of undergraduate medical education.[2]

Hierarchical language has measurable costs. It breeds imposter syndrome. With over 6.5 million Canadians lacking a regular family physician, undermining the PA role through implicit hierarchies exacerbates an already strained system. Evidence consistently demonstrates that interprofessional collaboration improves patient outcomes and mitigates burnout.[3]

The remedy is intentional language. For example, utilizing affirming questions like "What drew you to the PA profession?" Embedding anti-hierarchical principles into preceptor training and interprofessional education accreditation standards would institutionalize this shift. Valuing PAs as equal and complementary partners is essential to building the collaborative teams our healthcare system urgently needs.

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