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A Canadian first: U of Manitoba physician assistant program expected to launch this fall

By Patrick Sullivan

The University of Manitoba medical school hopes to launch Canada's first training program for civilian physician assistants this fall. "I'm cautiously optimistic," says Dr. Wil Fleisher, an associate dean in the university's Office of Medical Education.

One reason for his optimism is that the project already enjoys "significant support" within the university and from the province's health minister, Theresa Oswald. The Manitoba Medical Association has also on board.

Physician assistants are also of considerable interest at the CMA, which in 2003 approved the inclusion of PA training in its conjoint accreditation process. Thus far the Canadian Forces' training program for PAs - the only one in Canada - has been accredited.

Interest at the CMA has also been growing because of Canada's physician shortage, which has sharpened the focus on the potential roles that could be played by "physician extenders" such as PAs. More than 70,000 PAs already practise in the US, which has more than 100 university-based training programs. Their work is supervised by physicians, but they are allowed (under that supervision) to prescribe some drugs and order some tests. Their most common duties include:

- patient interviews and medical histories;
- physical examinations;
- selected diagnostic/therapeutic tests and interventions; and
- preventive health counselling.

CMA President Brian Day, an orthopedic surgeon, notes that many PAs specialize in fields such as orthopedics and obstetrics. "In the US this is so well organized there is an association for PAs who specialize in orthopedic surgery," he said. "They are particularly valuable in terms of follow-up care."

He said the CMA and Canadian Orthopaedic Association are already collaborating on the PA issue, and noted that the CMA passed a resolution calling for expanded use of PAs in the civilian setting during its 2007 annual meeting in Vancouver.

The Manitoba program, which is slated to last 26 months, would offer a master's level degree to up to 12 students per year. Applicants will require an undergraduate degree in a health field and must have provided at least 2,000 hours of patient care. Planning has been under way for about two years, and Fleisher said a curriculum has been developed.

He doesn't expect to have any trouble filling the openings - the university has already received dozens of enquiries from potential students. The CMA also received about a dozen enquiries after it ran a single article on cma.ca in 2007 about the University of Manitoba's consideration

of a PA program.

The final steps in the approval process are the go-ahead from the university's Senate and Board of Governors. Although those decisions aren't expected until April, the university is already advertising the "contingent appointment" of an executive director for physician assistant training on the Web site of the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants. Fleisher anticipates that training will proceed this fall. "We see this as a profoundly innovative program," he said.

Manitoba is considered a natural site for the first civilian PA program, since it is the only province with legislation governing their roles and responsibilities.

"We were delighted to see that the University of Manitoba, which is one of Canada's finest educational institutions, has accepted the challenge to develop the first civilian PA program in Canada," says Jack Buchanan, vice-president of the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants (CAPA). "This is a momentous occasion for the PA profession in Canada and CAPA stands prepared to assist both the university and those graduating to ensure we continue our historic drive toward becoming a valued and collaborative profession in Canadian health care."

Elsewhere, the Ontario Medical Association (OMA) is working closely with the province on several demonstration projects involving up to 69 PA positions, and is taking the lead on one involving PAs employed in physician offices. As well, two Ontario universities are considering introducing training for PAs.

"The PA programs are an important part of strengthening inter-professional care in Ontario," says OMA President Janice Willett. "We have been working closely with doctors to ensure the PA program is properly integrated into our health care system and that a good base is established for this new relationship. Doctors are very interested in working with PAs to improve access to care for patients."

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