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U of M pioneers new medical master's program

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As soon as next fall, the University of Manitoba may begin training physician assistants (PAs) in a new master's program, intended to alleviate ongoing doctor shortages in the province and create a more collaborative health-care system.

Once approved by the U of M's Senate, Board of Governors, and the provincial government's Council on Post-Secondary Education, the Faculty of Medicine will begin enrolling students slated to begin in September, according to Wil Fleisher, associate dean of medical education.

PAs are highly skilled health-care professionals who support physicians in a variety of health-care settings.

"The physician assistant is an 'extender' of their physician's competencies and capabilities," said Fleisher. "What they're able to do is whatever the physician that they work with is willing and able to delegate to them."

PAs can work in primary care or in emergency settings. Their duties can include performing physical examinations, diagnostic techniques, therapeutic procedures, and prescribing medication.

Fleisher added that PAs must practice under the supervision of a doctor and cannot practice autonomously.

This supervision can be as simple as one check-in per week, according to William Pope, the registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba —the future regulatory body of PAs .

The first year of the proposed two-year program will be "didactic, seminar-driven" education according to Fleisher.

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This compares with the four-year classroom training doctors undertake.

The second year will be “clinical site” education, which can be compared to the two to five years that doctors undertake in clinical training after they have completed their degrees.

The disparity in training intensity and extensiveness dictates that PAs will not take the place of doctors.

At the U of M, requirements for the proposed program will be commensurate with all master's programs — a four-year undergraduate degree, a minimum GPA of 3.0 in the last two years of study, and specific course prerequisites.

Jay Doering, dean of graduate studies at the U of M, said that the program's prerequisites would likely be science related.

“Basically, you're looking for someone who has a bit of a health sciences background or a life sciences background,” he said. “It's not going to be someone from history.”

Fleisher added that experience would be considered.

“At least initially, we will be expecting that our applicants have completed at least 2,000 hours of direct clinical and patient care.”

In the United States, the first class of PA entered their program in 1965 with a model based on the fast-track training for Second World War doctors, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA). The association reports that there are currently 130 accredited programs in the U.S.

Mean income for PAs in full-time clinical practice was US\$86,214 in 2006, according to the AAPA.

Currently in Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces Medical School is the only institution that offers a PA program. Graduates who practice in Manitoba are called clinical assistants.

The U of M is the first Canadian university to pursue a PA program.

“We've taken a very innovative and hopefully visionary look at

this, and I'm looking forward to in two, three years [when] our first graduates hit the road," said Fleisher.

Fleisher said, "There's going to be a huge demand across Canada — guaranteed."

He said that the program is especially important because of the current "health-care delivery crisis," which he attributed to a shortage of doctors and nurses, the aging population, a shift in the lifestyle expectations of new doctors who want balance in work and home, and the retirement of baby-boomer generation physicians.

"I think [the PA program] is one of many answers that we have to look at to solve this crisis," said Fleisher.

"The way we that we all practice, the way health care is delivered in a broader sense will also have to be looked at over the next five, 10 years."