

Small Study Captures PA Use in Heart Failure Management

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According to the American Heart Association 2009 Heart Disease and Stroke Update, cardiovascular mortality has declined over the past 10 years. However, despite significant advances in therapeutic options, in our aging population, the incidence of heart failure remains high with approximately 500,000 new diagnoses each year.

Equally concerning is that key risk factors for heart failure such as diabetes, obesity, atherosclerotic disease and hypertension — even with new screening, education and treatment efforts — are on the rise in the U.S. population. Further compounding this is the expectation that the over-65 population will double in the next 20 years.

Certainly, the need for heart failure care will continue to challenge cardiology practices in an environment in which manpower is already stretched for services. To help meet these demands, many cardiology practices have employed mid-level providers such as Physician Assistants (PAs) and Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) to help manage these patients.

The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) estimates there are nearly 70,000 PAs in clinical practice across the spectrum of more than 60 practice specialties in 2009. About 37 percent of PAs practice in general practice settings such as family medicine, general internal medicine, pediatrics and obstetrics/gynecology. About 10 percent practice in internal medicine subspecialties, such as cardiology.



According to the AAPA, more than 2,000 PA members now identify cardiology as their primary practice setting, which is essentially twice the number represented in the 2007 AAPA member roll.

As the PA and APN roles in cardiology have evolved, they have become integral to the provision of care, particularly for heart failure management. The AAPA and the Association of Physician Assistants in Cardiology (APAC) have conducted surveys of clinical duties that PAs perform in a cardiology practice, but no specific data exist on how PAs are used for heart failure management in a cardiology practice setting.

In 2008, the Physician Assistant Studies Program of the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth, Texas, conducted a study of 70 cardiology PAs who manage heart failure patients to better understand their use in this practice setting. Most of the respondents (77 percent) managed heart failure patients in both the inpatient and outpatient setting. All of the respondents also participated in other aspects of cardiovascular care. Interestingly, though, most devoted 50 percent or more time to the management of heart failure patients.

The most common duties performed by the PAs included:

- managing acute congestive HF patients (97 percent)
- monitoring patient response to medication management (96 percent)
- titrating/adjusting HF-specific medications (94 percent)
- patient education, such as counseling HF patients concerning disease management, advanced directives, diet and exercise (93 percent).

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