

Physician Assistants – Results of the 2010 National Physician Survey

The United States, which has recognized physician assistants (PAs) since the 1960s, currently has 75,000 licensed practitioners in 50 states. Canada's history has been much shorter with respect to physician assistants (the 1980s) and until recent years has been restricted to the Canadian Forces in terms of training and careers. In 2010, they numbered 285 and there are now three universities where students can enroll in PA programs in addition to the original military training setting. They are located at the University of Manitoba, McMaster University and a consortium including University of Toronto, the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and the Michener Institute for Applied Health Sciences.¹

The latest iteration of the National Physician Survey included a few questions with respect to physician assistants. For details on the methodology and response rate, visit www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca. Results are considered to be accurate within +/- 1.2% 19 times out of 20.

The 2010 results showed that less than 1% of physician respondents indicated that physician assistants were among the three main health care providers that they regularly referred patients to and/or collaborated with. Of these physicians, 73% were family physicians and the remainder from other specialty disciplines.

When asked about barriers to engaging a physician assistant, the most commonly cited one was limited funding models. This was indicated by 38% of all respondents with a low of 27% in PEI and over 40% in Ontario and British Columbia.

The next three barriers were cited in almost equal numbers by about one out of every five respondents. They included: not being introduced yet in their jurisdiction (23%), lack of information about them (23%) and liability not being clearly defined (22%). Also, 22% indicated their practice would not benefit from having a PA.

Doctors from Manitoba were the least likely to say that physician assistants had not yet been introduced in their jurisdiction (13%) and those respondents from Saskatchewan were the most likely at 33%.

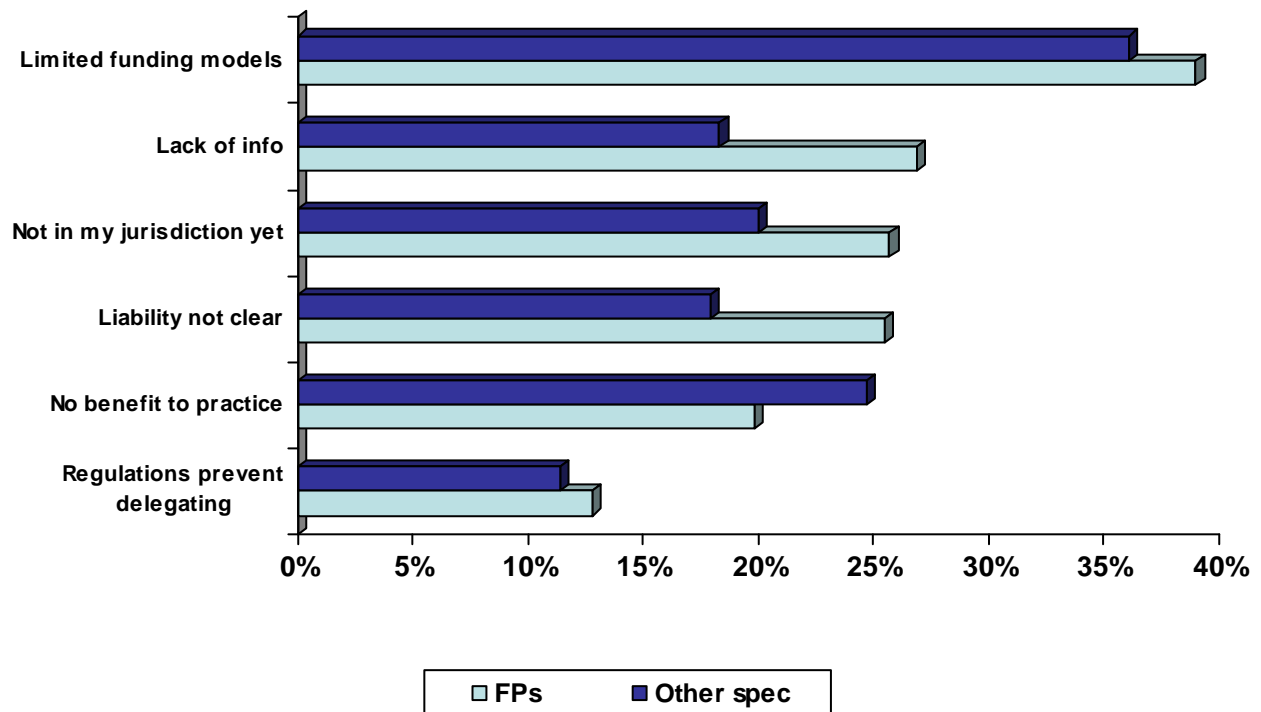
FPs were more likely than other specialists to cite a lack of information as a barrier (27% versus 18%) as well as liability issues (26% versus 18%); see graph 1. There were no appreciable differences in the responses by age or sex with the exception of those physicians 65 or older who were more likely (37%) to indicate that their practice would not benefit from having one and the youngest age group (less than 35) needing

¹ Jones I, Hooker R. Physician assistants in Canada, Update on health policy initiatives. *Canadian Family Physician*. Vol 57: March 2011.

more information (32%). Over half of physicians (52%) either said their practice would not benefit from a PA or they did not answer the question.

Additional write-ins by some physicians pointed out barriers such as physical space, the decision being up to someone other than a physician or that their practice organization or hospital does not allow the use of physician assistants.

Graph 1: Barriers to engaging a Physician Assistant by broad discipline



Source: 2010 National Physician Survey. Canadian Medical Association, College of Family Physicians of Canada and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

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