



RNAO

Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers
autorisés de l'Ontario

Speaking out for health. Speaking out for nursing.

April 27, 2009

Mr. Ian Jones, MPAS, BCHS, PA-C/ CA cert.
Vice President
Canadian Association of Physician Assistants
1745 Alta Vista Drive
Ottawa, ON K1A 0K6

Via email: i.jones@live.ca

Dear Mr. Jones:

Thank you for your letter, received March 30, 2009, with regards to the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario's (RNAO) position concerning the introduction of physician assistants into the Ontario health-care system. First of all, please be assured that we are well aware of the history of physician assistants in the Canadian Forces and have no criticism of the fine and valuable service they have provided over the years.

Our concern - and to be clear it is a fundamental concern - is this: the role of physician assistants in Ontario is not supported by their level of experience and education. Consequently, patient care and safety are at risk of being compromised. Physician assistants in Ontario are not subject to the high standards of practice governing regulated health professions.

RNAO has consistently raised the alarm over the introduction of unregulated roles in health care that in our view impair the continuity of patient care, increase public confusion and significantly increase costs in a system that is already struggling to achieve financial accountability. Additionally, the lack of a regulatory college deprives Ontario residents of the over-sight and access to a formalized complaints process that are the hallmarks of public protection and self-regulating health disciplines.

The RNAO is concerned about both the length of the current Ontario PA education and your statement that education is conducted in a 'medical model.' One year of didactic teaching, followed by one year of clinical exposure is inadequate, given the complexity of the health-care needs of Ontarians. To access the McMaster University program, an aspiring physician assistant needs only to have completed two years of undergraduate education in any field and at any time. There is no prerequisite education in health sciences, nor is it necessary to have had experience in direct patient contact. Yet, a two-year university program as a PA following two years in an unrelated undergraduate discipline qualifies someone for unregulated practice as a physician assistant in Ontario.

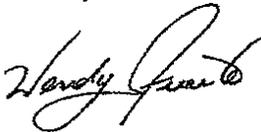
We appreciate that it does not need to be this way. For example, in Manitoba, where physician assistants have been licensed since 1999, a higher level of education is required. As of last fall, students can qualify as physician assistants following a stringent graduate program at the University of Manitoba (Masters of Physician Assistant studies) for which the prerequisite is a four-year degree in health sciences with a minimum 3.0 GPA and 2000 hours of direct patient contact in a health sciences field.

In addition to serious concerns about the inadequacy of standards of education and experience, the RNAO views the focus on a traditional medical model, rather than a holistic, patient-centered approach as a substantive weakness in the education approach that has been adopted by the Ontario government. It is an approach that argues against the very nature of interprofessional practice which is, as you are no doubt aware, emerging as a leading edge practice in the delivery of health services. In fact, it belies the argument that physician assistants occupy an integral place on the interprofessional team.

Again, the RNAO recognizes the expertise and achievements of medics or physician assistants in the Canadian Forces. However, the current model in Ontario, based on the expanded role of unregulated physician assistants who have limited education and experience, isn't the answer to long patient wait times, nor will it make the system more cost-effective in times of fiscal restraint. Most important, patient health will be put at risk.

The RNAO is committed to interprofessional collaboration that improves the public's access to universally accessible health services through increasing the scope of practice of self-regulating health professions in accordance with their education and competencies. From that point of view, the RNAO is compelled to conclude that the physician assistant model currently being promoted in Ontario is badly flawed. We appreciate the time you have taken to write to us with your concerns.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wendy Fucile". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "W" and a long, sweeping underline.

Wendy Fucile RN, BSCN, MPA, CHE
President
Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario

cc: RNAO's BOD