

Chapter 1

Becoming a Physician Assistant

In This Chapter

- ▶ Going from student to physician assistant
- ▶ Preparing for the PANCE or PANRE

Physician assistants have been around since the 1960s. Dr. Charles Hudson suggested the idea to the American Medical Association in 1961. Then Dr. Eugene Stead Jr. of the Duke University Medical Center assembled a class made up of U.S. Navy hospital corpsmen and applied techniques he had learned about fast-tracking doctors in World War II. The first class graduated in 1967.

To become a physician assistant today, you have to take and pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE). And to continue working in the field, you have to be recertified every 6 years by taking and passing the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Examination (PANRE). (Starting in 2014, recertification will be required every 10 years.) These tests are tough — they're lengthy and have challenging questions. But if you prepare well, you'll have a surprisingly easy time, and we're confident that you'll rise to the challenge.

This chapter gives you a quick overview of what a physician assistant does. It also outlines the PANCE and PANRE.

Knowing What to Expect as a PA

A *physician assistant* (PA) is a well-educated healthcare professional who is nationally certified and licensed by the state in which he or she practices. The PA practices medicine under the supervision of a physician. A physician assistant can have a large degree of autonomy, depending on his or her experience and the doctor's willingness to delegate.

PAs prevent, diagnose, and treat illness and injury by providing many healthcare services, including the following:

- ✓ Conducting physical exams
- ✓ Ordering and interpreting tests
- ✓ Counseling people on preventive healthcare
- ✓ Assisting in surgery
- ✓ Writing prescriptions

If you see the letters PA after a person's name, that means *physician assistant*.

In this section, we discuss PA education programs, steps to take after you receive your certification, and your job prospects as a PA.

Training to become a PA

To become a PA, you must pass the PANCE. But first, you need to get an education through an accredited PA program. Currently, the United States has more than 160 such programs. The program at Duke University in North Carolina is probably best known because the nation's first PAs were trained at and graduated from Duke.

PA training at the graduate level takes 2 to 3 years and involves a combination of classroom studies and clinical rotations. Admissions departments are selective, and for many programs, your GRE score must be relatively high. So why do we say this? It's a confidence builder. If you survived PA education and training, you're more than capable of acing the PANCE!

What you do when you're a PA

After you're certified as a physician assistant, you have to fulfill some legal requirements, keep up with medical developments, and celebrate your profession, all the while treating patients. Here's a quick list of things to do:

- ✓ Get a license.
- ✓ Get a job as a physician assistant and put all your training to good use caring for patients.
- ✓ Get professional liability insurance.
- ✓ Register with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), as needed.
- ✓ If you're in the United States, join the American Academy of Physician Assistants (www.aapa.org).
- ✓ Earn and report 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME) hours every 2 years. You can obtain CME hours by attending seminars, journal reading, and online study. Many PAs choose to attend a conference to obtain most or all of their CME credits.
- ✓ Celebrate National Physician Assistant Week on October 6 through October 12. October 6 is the day the first PA class graduated at Duke University and just happens to be the birthday of Dr. Eugene Stead, creator of the PA program.
- ✓ Reregister your certificate with NCCPA (National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants) every 2 years.
- ✓ Take the PANRE after 6 years (or 10 years starting in 2014).



Employers often pay for the PA's professional liability insurance, registration fees with the DEA, state licensing fees, and credentialing fees.

Sizing up your prospects

So after you've gone through years of training and hours of testing, will you be able to find a job? Yes, most likely. Will it pay well? Yes, relatively so. Given that most PA programs in colleges and universities charge pretty high tuition, you'll need a good job.

In its 2010 census report, the American Academy of Physician Assistants reported that the median income for PAs ranged from \$85,000 to \$101,000. Income varies depending on experience, specialty, practice setting, and location.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) indicates the following:

- ✓ Employment of PAs is expected to grow by 39 percent from 2008 to 2018, much faster than the average for all occupations.
- ✓ More PAs will provide primary care and assist with medical and surgical procedures because PAs are “cost-effective and productive members of the healthcare team.” Cost containment is likely to be a factor. States will continue to expand the PA’s scope of practice by allowing them to perform more procedures.
- ✓ Besides working in traditional office-based settings, PAs should find a growing number of jobs in hospitals, academic medical centers, public clinics, and prisons. Job opportunities should also be good in rural and inner-city healthcare facilities.

These days, a physician in private practice can’t function without a PA or a nurse practitioner (NP), and the ever-increasing healthcare demands of public institutions, hospitals, and clinics should ensure job security.

Introducing the Tests

The National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants administers the two tests that are required of PAs: the PANCE, which certifies you to work as a PA, and the PANRE, which you take every 6 years (or 10 years starting in 2014) for recertification. In this section, we provide a quick overview of each test. We give you more details about applying for and taking the tests, as well as their content, in Chapter 2.

Getting your PANCE on

The PANCE is the essential exam for certification, and certification is essential for licensure. This exam has 300 questions and takes 5 hours to complete, not including breaks.



The PANCE is a testimonial to your knowledge. Doctors and nurses take qualifying examinations, so for a PA, certification is expected, too. This tells the world you’re ready to do the work.

A few simple — but not easy — steps are involved in preparing for the PANCE. You’ve already accomplished the first few items:

- ✓ Enter a PA program at an accredited school.
- ✓ Take the classes and do the clinical rotations.
- ✓ Buy an excellent test preparation book. Why, that’s what’s in your hands!
- ✓ Begin a concerted program of test preparation based on the medical facts and the sample questions in this book. This book is as much about strategies for approaching test questions as it is about medical topics.

What's your specialty? Earning a CAQ

A practicing PA can earn a Certificate of Added Qualification, or CAQ. This certificate recognizes the PA for advanced knowledge and a skill set in a particular specialty. Current CAQ specialties include nephrology, orthopedic surgery, cardiothoracic surgery, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. Here are the requirements for the CAQ:

- ✓ Having worked the equivalent of 2 years full time as a PA with at least 50 percent of that time spent in that particular specialty
- ✓ Obtaining continuing medical education (CME) hours that are specific to the specialty
- ✓ Having a supervising physician write a letter of support stating a high level of performance
- ✓ Taking a multiple-choice examination of 120 questions in that specialty area

Reviewing for the PANRE

The Physician Assistant National Recertifying Examination (PANRE) is just what it says — a periodic recertifying examination that ensures that your knowledge is up to date. Every 6 years, a PA must successfully complete the PANRE. This test has 240 questions (instead of the PANCE's 300), and there are four test blocks instead of five. You still average, however, about a minute per question (60 questions in 60 minutes).

The PANRE offers you content options. About 60 percent is the same generalist exam as the PANCE, but you choose the emphasis of the other 40 percent. Here are your three options:

- ✓ Adult medicine
- ✓ Surgery
- ✓ Primary care

A recertifying PA may want to choose adult medicine or surgery if that's where he or she works. If you choose primary care, then the PANRE content won't be at all different from the PANCE. And even if you choose the surgery or the adult medicine option, a large portion of the examination will still contain general medicine questions.