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Opinion | Patients are enduring excruciating wait times and limited access to doctors. People like me are part of the solution

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Physician assistants are medical professionals trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventative services under a physician's supervision.

Dreamstime

By Isabella Zaffino, Contributor

Isabella Zaffino is a second-year Physician Assistant student at the University of Toronto. She also holds a HBSc from the University of Toronto, where she majored in life sciences.

At a time when Canada's health-care system faces unprecedented challenges — from critical physician shortages to record emergency room closures — we must look toward solutions that promote collaboration, not competition.

Physician assistants (PAs) are one such solution.

PAs are medical professionals trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventative services under a physician's supervision. The training is broad and prepares them to work across various medical specialties. A physician assistants' role is not to operate independently, but to enhance health-care delivery. While their roles and responsibilities sound similar, PAs do not replace physicians, nurses, or other health-care professionals. Instead, they complement the system, extending the reach of overburdened teams and improving access to care for patients across Canada.

I chose to pursue the PA profession because I wanted to work directly with patients and help make it easier for people to access health care. I grew up in Vaughan, Ont., and worked at my local hospital throughout my undergrad and while applying to PA school. Having worked in both the emergency room and main entrance aiding with way-finding and administrative tasks, I have seen how long wait times and limited access to health-care providers affects patients and their families, often leaving them feeling overlooked and uncertain. At the same time, I've witnessed how effective collaboration among health-care teams can significantly improve patient lives — through co-ordinated care and attentive, timely support.

Becoming a PA is a way to be part of a collaborative model that prioritizes teamwork and patient-centred care, while also promoting greater health equity — a path I find not only rewarding, but also essential for the future of medicine.

Some people think PAs are here to replace physicians. That is not the case at all. PAs are here to ease the load physicians carry and improve access to quality health care. In primary care, PAs can handle most patient visits on their own without needing a physician to step in. For instance, they manage infections and injuries, ongoing chronic conditions, and annual checkups. They conduct physical exams, order and interpret lab tests and imaging, prescribe and adjust medications, and provide preventative care.

In emergency rooms, their impact is just as clear. PAs have cut wait times by almost half and significantly reduce the number of patients who leave the ER — often due to frustration over long waits and overcrowding — without being seen. PAs ease the load on physicians by managing routine cases and filling gaps in services. This help allows physicians to focus on more complex patients. This collaboration enhances the overall efficiency of our health care system, easing the strain on overburdened physicians.

And since Ontario launched its first physician assistant programs at the University of Toronto and McMaster University in 2007, physicians have recognized the value PAs bring to health-care teams. In an [Ontario study](#) surveying physician satisfaction with their PA colleagues, 92.9 per cent of respondents reported being satisfied with their PAs, and 93.1 per cent said they would recommend that other physicians consider hiring PAs. Similarly, a study examining [physician perspectives](#) on having PAs on their teams found that most felt PAs added flexibility, improved staffing consistency, and supported continuity of care. Public support for PAs is also strong. Many Canadians who have received [care involving a PA](#) report high satisfaction, citing positive rapport and a better understanding of their medical diagnoses.

The World Health Organization emphasizes that strengthening interdisciplinary teams is key to building a resilient health-care system — and PAs embody this idea. We are trained to communicate, collaborate, and adapt within team-based models

of care — a model Canada urgently needs to expand if it hopes to address systemic challenges like access inequity, high wait times, and provider shortages.

Recognizing the proven value of PAs in strengthening health-care delivery, Canadian universities are expanding PA education programs to meet urgent system demands. McMaster University and the University of Toronto have both increased enrolment, while institutions such as the University of Calgary have launched new programs to grow the PA workforce. These accredited programs are a deliberate response to the health-care system's pressing need for more collaborative, adaptable clinicians. This investment in education is a clear acknowledgment that PAs are a vital part of building a more accessible and sustainable health-care system.

Our health-care system is at a breaking point. Solutions rooted in collaboration, not territorialism, are the way forward. Recognizing the complementary role of PAs is a necessary step toward a more accessible and sustainable Canadian health-care system.

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