

Program at Duke

Doctors' Assistants on Rise

The following article was prepared by D. Robert Howard, M.D., director of the Physician's Assistant Program at Duke University, and C. Emil Fasser, a program assistant.

DURHAM, N.C.—We are at the beginning of a new era in health care. Our old methods of delivering medical care were burdened with problems. These included a shortage of physicians; unequal distribution of physicians; increased demands on the medical profession through such programs as Medicare and Medicaid; and the phasing out of the general practitioner, due to specialization.

These problems led to the establishment of Duke's Physician's Assistant Program, aimed at extending physicians services and increasing the quality of patient care. The original class five years ago was small; each year, it has grown. At present, there are 40 students in the class that started last September. It is planned to increase this to 60 students in the fall and 100 a year thereafter.

The idea of the program is to provide the physician with an assistant who can free him from many of his detailed responsibilities. A question of acceptance on the part of the physician as well as the patient naturally arises. Will this new health worker find a comfortable role for himself?

So far, acceptance by both physicians not related to the Duke program and those involved in it has been good. Pa-

tient acceptance has also been good, with the best response at the middle income level.

This new profession has created in the mind of the physician a problem over the assistant's legal definition. Paramedical personnel traditionally have performed certain delegated tasks for doctors. But this new category is pushing into areas once the sole responsibility of the physician.

The assistants are ready to support the physician in the office, the home and the hospital. They can perform detailed physical examinations, take in-depth medical histories and follow through on numerous intricate and complex laboratory and diagnostic procedures. So the physician suddenly is confronted with the responsibility for the actions of his assistant.

The five-year program here has proved that the assistants are well trained and ready to assume these responsibilities. Now emphasis is being put on formalizing their legal record.

Already, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma have revised their state practice acts to allow physicians to delegate tasks to this new member of the health team. Efforts are under way in

North Carolina for a similar revision to the Medical Practice Act.

With the problem of acceptance improving, what about two other major considerations: professional growth and pay? In 1968 the American Association of Physician's Assistants was formed. It provides educational services for self-improvement of its members. The AAPA is intended to be to the physician's assistant what the AMA (American Medical Association) is to the physician. And in the matter of financial return, salaries are in the \$10,000-\$15,000 range, based on the fact that the assistant allows the physician to increase his productivity from 30 percent up.

Although Duke was the "father" of the physician's assistant

concept, similar programs are developing throughout the country. They are offered at the following schools:

Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, N.C. (Physician's Assistant Program); University of Alabama, Birmingham (Pathology Assistant Program); Alderson-Broaddus College, Phillip, W. Va. (Physician's Assistant Program).

Also, University of Colorado, Denver (Child Health Associate Program); University of Texas, Galveston (Clinical Associate Program); De Anza College, Cupertino, Calif. (Medical Assistant Program); Foothill Junior College, Santa Clara, Calif. (Physician's Assistant Program); and University of Washington, Seattle (MEDEX).

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