

RELEASED



RESTRICTED — Not to be released outside the Federal Accounting Office except on the basis of specific approval by the Office of Congressional Relations, a record of which is kept by the Distribution Section, Publications Branch, OAS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

090566
090566
~~4.21.05~~

RELEASED

B-140300

OCT 10 1973

~~74-0284~~

91R The Honorable Charles A. Vanik
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Vanik:

Your May 23, 1973, letter asked us to examine and obtain data on the Federal program to train physician's assistants (PA). Pursuant to your request and after discussion with your office, we reviewed the Civil Service Commission (CSC) role in the program and developed data on schools, participants, and salaries. We also inquired into PA reimbursement policies being developed by the Social Security Administration (SSA). 13 26

CSC ROLE IN PA PROGRAM

In March 1971 CSC issued announcement number 428 for the position of PA in the Federal service. According to CSC, this action followed extensive discussions with medical representatives of Federal agencies which had indicated a desire to experiment with PA in medical care. The PA position was seen as a way to improve the use of professional medical skills and to offer a new employment opportunity for veterans with military experience as medical corpsmen.

Physician's assistants are trained to help physicians by providing diagnostic and therapeutic medical care and services under the physicians' supervision. Training consists of a specialized course of study and medical experience. A large number of candidates was expected from two main groups, former medical corpsmen and nurses.

When CSC issued its announcement in March 1971, it did not mention that the education requirements had to be met at approved schools. At that time, no organization was established for accrediting schools for this training. As an interim measure, CSC established a panel of 4 doctors that evaluated curriculums from an HEW list of 68 schools. The doctors

904482 090566

were obtained from what were expected to be the three largest Federal users of physician's assistants--Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW); Department of Defense (DOD); and Veterans Administration (VA)--and from the American Medical Association (AMA). CSC has indicated that the approach was intentionally conservative because of the potential impact on patient care. If the course descriptions did not wholly satisfy the panel, they were rejected. CSC personnel did not directly counsel schools or students or make onsite evaluations before, during, or after submission of the curriculums.

None of the 68 schools were advised whether they had been accredited unless an inquiry was made, probably because CSC did not consider the panel's judgment as final. In November 1972 AMA began to accredit programs for training assistants to a licensed physician and CSC now accepts AMA training accreditation in the specialty as qualifying under its examination.

CSC sees its principal role in public employment programs as (1) informing the public of opportunities in the Federal service, (2) setting job standards, and (3) determining the eligibility of people to compete for jobs. CSC attempts to assess agency needs in a broad and systematic way; to use such information to develop qualification standards and examinations; and to make the information available to the public, including educational institutions and other likely sources of applicants. However, agencies must establish positions and recruit applicants.

After grading the unassembled examinations and sending out scores, CSC maintains a register of applicants it has rated eligible and responds to agency requests for eligibles. In keeping with its normal role, CSC has not tried to identify positions in Federal agencies where physician's assistants could be placed upon graduation.

THE CUYAHOGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The panel did not approve the curriculum of the Cuyahoga Community College, but the college was not advised of this

fact. Students nearing graduation applied for Federal employment but were told by CSC they were ineligible because the curriculum had not been approved.

CSC officials agree that the announcement should have stated the need for curriculum approval. CSC has recently issued an amendment stipulating that AMA accreditation will now be accepted. Now all schools previously approved will be accepted along with any other schools AMA subsequently accredits. Cuyahoga Community College has applied for AMA accreditation.

PROGRAM RESULTS TO DATE

As of June 30, 1973, the 14 approved schools had graduated 588 students with 639 students still enrolled. We do not have veteran status information on these students or on the veterans status and number of students enrolled in non-accredited schools.

Since this program started in 1971, CSC has received about 1,200 applications from people wishing to compete for PA positions. Through early May 1973, 36 career selections and 1 temporary selection have been made, another 56 eligibles have been placed on a register, and the balance have been rated ineligible. Of the 36 career hires, 30 were veterans and between 20 and 25 of these have been placed with VA.

Although the number of hires seems small, several factors make it difficult to assess the program results to date. Even though the announcement seemed quite optimistic, no one knew initially how many such positions were likely to develop. Also, not all physician's assistants in the Federal service are reflected in CSC records. This is because people with these skills in agencies were promoted internally to PA positions.

We were told that both DOD and HEW have programs for training and promoting their own physician's assistants. DOD's program involves military personnel and HEW has an upward mobility program for Indians. According to VA,

some of its people had been promoted from within, although it did not know how many. In addition, not all the eligibles are fully mobile. Of the 56 people on CSC's register, only 18 are available for jobs "anywhere," 21 will take jobs in only 1 city or 1 State and 17 are available for more than 1 State but not anywhere. We were told that many of these jobs are in remote locations. In a few cases, special recruiting authorities have been issued to agencies for filling vacancies in locations for which registered eligibles were unavailable.

Following its normal practice, CSC returned to the applicants about 1,100 applications rated ineligible. However, we accumulated information on 166 applications rated ineligible after November 1, 1972. Of the 166 ineligibles, 100 were Vietnam-era veterans, 32 were other veterans, and 34 were non-veterans. Inadequate education was the reason for 160 ineligible ratings and, of this number, 18 had attended PA schools that the panel had not approved. The other six applicants were rejected because of inadequate or obsolete experience.

We are doing additional work to get a better picture of what happens to PA graduates and, as agreed, a copy of that report will be forwarded to you when it is available. We have accumulated some cursory information which you requested on salary levels of those in private and Federal employment. For the former, an article in Medical Newsmagazine of October 1972, refers to a salary range of about \$8,500 to \$15,000; the top figure is probably paid to a physician's assistant starting in a specialist's practice. For the latter, the prevailing pay rates for GS-7, 9, and 11 are \$9,520, \$11,614, and \$13,996, respectively, and the GS level at which an applicant starts is predicated on education, experience, and training.

Your office also asked for information about demonstration projects to guide SSA in establishing reimbursement policies for services of physician's assistants. Under House bill 1 (Public Law 92-603, section 222 (b) (1)), SSA is authorized to carry out studies, experiments, or demonstration projects on the determination of the most appropriate reimbursement methods for the services of physician's assistants and nurses.

B-140300

As of August 1, 1973, SSA had been developing a request for proposals that will enable it to acquire the services of a contractor who will establish the parameters of any future demonstration project in this area. SSA expects to let the contract, review the results of work done under it, and initiate by the end of September 1973 the demonstration required under House bill 1.

We do not plan to distribute this report further unless you agree or publicly announce its content.

We trust this information satisfies your request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James B. Axtell".

Comptroller General
of the United States