

## **Hints for Public Education**

**By: Sue Swank-Caschera PA-C**

For years PAs have struggled to educate patients and the public about what we do and who we are. It is only in recent years that patients understand when introductions are made. Still, we get the question: “Are you studying to be a doctor?” The public education committee strives to promote our profession throughout the regions, but we need the help of all PAs. Here are some ideas and suggestions for letting people know who we are. These are simple ways to promote the PA profession.

Start with the young children. Help at your local elementary schools. One program that is done in the Williamsport area is reading to children in the schools. Initially, parents were invited into the classrooms to read a favorite story. When I was asked to read to my son’s class, I chose the book: “What’s in the Doctor’s Bag?” I changed the title a bit covering doctor with PAs. I also took my bag into the classroom and helped the children understand what the instruments did and why we used them. That was a big hit – especially the reflex hammer. Talk to your children’s teachers or call the school and ask about this type of activity. It might even be a new idea for your area.

A few years ago, PSPA joined with family practice doctors in the Tar Wars Program. This was a packaged program which was developed for fifth graders to educate about them about the dangers of smoking. It has been well received and continues in the Williamsport area. The residency program has taken over the programs in my area; however, the local PAs still fill in when a resident is unable. This might be a good partnering activity for PAs in primary care to do with their supervising physician. Remember the PSPA motto: PA - PArtners in Medicine?

Another activity in the schools that is well received by teachers, students, and parents are the career fairs. Most schools start these in the elementary grades and continue them throughout high school. Start by contacting the guidance department in your local schools. Most welcome volunteers to participate in the fairs. After a few years, the students will come back to you saying – “Hey, I remember you.” Then, you know that you’re getting through. Much adult education occurs at these events, too. It’s a great way to clarify our role in health care.

If a local college is in your area, offer to be a mentor to students majoring in the sciences. A few students may call inquiring about careers as a PA. It’s an idea. I have only had a few contacts in the past ten years. There may be some science clubs who request speakers regarding career choices.

Volunteer – What better way to promote well being than helping with programs throughout your community. Most youth sport’s teams require that the volunteer coaches learn first aid. Usually, a certified course is not required. Sharing our training and expertise helps others understand what we know. It gets the PA name out there too. In this way, PAs become part of the team and the coaches join our health care team. Some groups that I have helped include: Little League Baseball, Boy Scouts of America, and AYSO soccer.

Another way to volunteer is sharing your skills with the community. Become a CPR or EMT instructor. By assisting with class in your local community, you help to educate the public on life saving skills and they become more familiar with PAs. You're seen as a helper in the community – a vital part. Some areas where I have taught CPR classes have been local industries, dental and health care offices, and schools.

Many volunteer organizations search for speakers. Volunteer to talk to civic groups about health care issues. Again, your introduction – PA-C – helps to educate the audience about our job and about the health topic.

Besides instructing, you can help to educate the public about health care issues by being a resource for your local media. Start by introducing yourself to members of your local press and offering your services. After getting to know these individuals, they will rely on you for information and guidance when issues arise. Healthy living tips are always a popular area to discuss. If you have a special expertise, the media will often focus on this even calling you when the issue becomes a hot news topic. In the past I have discussed stress reactions and coping techniques on local radio, TV, and with the newspapers.

It helps to make media contacts or friends before you ask for favors – like promoting PA Day. After helping the reporters with their research, when the week of October 6th approaches, they are much more receptive to promoting the PA profession in the media. The Williamsport newspaper even did a full page story about PAs in our area discussing our jobs, education, and community involvement. It certainly helps to have friends in the media.

Some of our local companies invite health care providers in for a day to promote healthy living to their employees. The focus in my region has been on poster displays or a screening technique. Usually, the local hospital performs cholesterol screens. Health care offices usually have posters and pamphlets. Recently, I created a cardiovascular wellness display showing healthy heart behaviors such as exercise and diet on one side of a table and unhealthy behaviors like smoking and obesity on the other side. I had a lot of visits and was able to educate people about the PA role as well as CV health.

Lastly, talk to people. Help your family and friends understand what PAs do. Practicing medicine involves more than just caring for patients; it includes caring for our neighbors in our community. They are often our best advocates. As you interact with people around town, talk to them. People are usually curious about what others do. So don't be shy. Show your pride in our profession and talk about it. PR is for everybody.