

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Physician Assistant Students: Findings From a National Study

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Abstract

Purpose The objectives of this study are to 1) determine the prevalence of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in currently enrolled Physician Assistant (PA) students and, 2) to quantitatively describe factors intersecting ADHD and PA school.

Methodology A 20-item survey was developed using Qualtrics, an online survey generator. The survey was emailed to directors of all PA programs affiliated with the Physician Assistant Education Association (n=335 programs). The directors of 37 programs distributed the survey and 510 students responded to the survey. Respondents self-reported ADHD diagnosis and information on exacerbation of symptoms during PA school, receiving academic accommodations, medication management, age of symptom onset, and diagnosis before or during PA school.

Results The final sample included 499 students (50.7% didactic, 49.3% clinical). The prevalence of ADHD was 29.7%. Of the students who reported an ADHD diagnosis, 89.1% noticed an exacerbation of symptoms during PA school, 30.4% were receiving academic accommodations, 85.1% were taking medication to manage their ADHD, 34.0% first noticed difficulties with focus/attention after turning 18-years-old, and 29.2% were diagnosed with ADHD after beginning PA school. Among students diagnosed after beginning PA school, 43.2% were diagnosed during the didactic phase of their program and 56.8% were diagnosed during the clinical phase.

Conclusions Our findings suggest that the prevalence of ADHD among PA students is approximately tenfold greater than that of the general adult population (29.7% vs 2.5%, respectively). Similar results have been observed in undergraduate and medical students; however, a proclivity for malingering and the inconsistent use of adequate methods for assessment/diagnosis of ADHD in these individuals may be concealing the true prevalence of ADHD among these populations.¹⁻³ These factors, among others, may have also contributed to the prevalence of ADHD observed in the present sample. The high prevalence of ADHD observed in this sample and across similar academic settings may suggest a potential relationship between the demands of higher-level academia and impaired executive functioning. Alas, the

subjective and complex nature of neurodevelopmental disorders like that of ADHD makes epidemiological research difficult. Further studies are needed to identify and account for any factors that contribute to the prevalence of ADHD among PA students.