



SEMPA Position Statement on Use of the Term “Doctor” for EMPAs with a Doctorate Degree

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In 2009, the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) and the American Academy of PAs (AAPA), along with other diverse stakeholders, endorsed the master’s degree as the entry-level and terminal degree for the PA profession, while still supporting colleges and universities offering postgraduate, non-profession-specific clinical doctorates as options available to PAs¹.

Academic and clinical doctorate degrees are available for PAs to pursue in order to gain advanced skills in research, education and leadership. Additionally, doctorate degrees have the potential to lead to career advancement. While the minority of PAs possess a doctoral degree, the interest in pursuing these degrees is gaining interest. Within the PA profession, the number of certified PAs with a doctoral degree has increased from 1.7% in 2016 to 2.0% in 2020². Specifically looking at PA educators in the academic setting, 23.5% of program faculty and 45.5% of program directors held a doctoral degree as of 2019³.

PAs with doctoral degrees often continue to practice in clinical settings with direct patient contact. There is ongoing discussion regarding how providers with doctorate degrees should identify themselves to their patients and other health care professionals. In the interest of patient-centered and informed care, SEMPA believes that EMPAs who possess a doctoral degree should not identify themselves as “doctor” in the setting of patient care. In the clinical setting, the average patient likely associates the term “doctor” with a physician. Additionally, multiple health care professionals using the term “doctor” can lead to confusion and difficulty understanding an already complex health care system. SEMPA maintains that transparency and honesty should be core principles of patient care; presenting a term of identification to a patient that is potentially misleading is unethical.

As an organization with a mission to advance, protect, and promote the role of EMPAs through education, advocacy, collaboration, and research, SEMPA fully supports and commends all PAs pursuing doctorate degrees as a means to achieve this charge. To help increase the understanding of the role PAs play in health care, SEMPA encourages EMPAs to display all appropriate degree credentials on their identification badge (i.e., MPAS, MCHS, DHSc, DMSc) and to educate patients on the significance of these credentials when the situation allows.

SEMPA recognizes and applauds the extraordinary efforts that go into pursuing higher education. Obtaining a medical degree or doctoral degree are distinguished achievements that deserve high accolades. Keeping patients informed and involved is a focus of patient-centered care and accurate identification of the health care professional is a simple, but impactful way to empower patients while still promoting the important role EMPAs play within the health care system.

References

1. Physician Assistant Education Association. Physician Assistant Clinical Doctorate Summit: Final report and summary. *J Physician Assist Educ.* 2009;20(2):22-28.
2. National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. 2020 Statistical Profile of Certified Physician Assistants. Johns Creek, GA, 2020
3. Physician Assistant Education Association, By the Numbers: Faculty Report 4: Data from the 2019 Faculty & Directors Survey. Washington, DC: PAEA; 2020. doi: 10.17538/FR4.2020