

RADIOLOGY PRACTITIONER ASSISTANT PROGRAM

History:

The concept of an educational program to prepare registered technologists to fulfill the role of an advanced practice technologist or a mid-level health professional in medical imaging originated when the Radiologic Sciences faculty was contacted by a group of radiologists serving in the U. S. Army at Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, WA. The colonel in charge of the radiology department at Madigan Army Medical Center was aware of the advanced radiography courses offered at Weber State University (WSU) and approached WSU to expand on these courses and prepare students to fulfill the role of a radiology practitioner assistant (RPA). The military proposed to use RPAs in remote areas and on the battle fields to provide radiology services, utilizing teleradiology to transmit the medical images for interpretation by radiologists at a central location. All three branches of the military were going to have students enrolled.

In the spring of 1994, members of the Radiologic Sciences faculty, the College dean and a member of CE program support traveled to Tacoma, WA and met with the radiologists and designed the curriculum and admission requirements. Upon returning to Utah, a proposal was developed and submitted to the Utah State Board of Regents and was subsequently approved. Approval from Northwest accrediting agency followed soon after the Regents approval. However, WSU was notified by the radiologists at Madigan Army Medical Center that the Department of Defense suffered a deep budget cut; therefore, participation in the program would have to be delayed. The medical community became aware of the program development and requested the program be conducted. The first class of students were admitted Autumn semester, 1996.

Educational Consensus Conferences held in 1995 and 1996 sponsored by the American Society of Radiologic Technologists (ASRT) developed an educational model for the profession and included the RPA as an advanced practice role that technologists should attain. Resolutions passed by the ASRT House of Delegates in 1996 and 1997 recognized the RPA level for registered technologists, timely action because a national shortage of radiologists existed. The American College of Radiology (ACR) passed a resolution in 2000 stating support for non-physician personnel performing radiology services with the appropriate education, licensing and credentials and working under the supervision of the radiologist.

The WSU RPA program has proven to be very successful, drawing students from across the country; thereby, recognizing the capabilities and abilities of technologists and elevating their role within the health care system. Radiologists from across the country who are working with the students and graduates have had input into the curriculum sequence, evaluation procedures and course content throughout the development of the program.

Purpose of the RPA Program:

The purpose of RPA program is to prepare registered technologists to serve as an advanced practice technologist and a mid-level health professional providing radiology services. The need for a health professional with advanced knowledge and skills in radiology services has resulted from primarily three events: (1) technological innovations have resulted in an expansion of medical imaging modalities and, as a result, has fractionated the radiologists' time; (2) managed health care has changed the focus from hospital-centered health care to a community-based system with satellite clinics, emergency centers and smaller affiliated hospitals; and (3) a national shortage of radiologists. In addition, patient-consumers have become more knowledgeable about medical care and demand appropriate health care service. As a result, the demand on radiologists' time has become overwhelming.

Throughout the years, technologists have been assuming more responsibilities, but have not possessed the appropriate educational background to be acknowledged for their knowledge and skills, nor have they been compensated for their efforts. The RPA role is a natural niche for technologists because they know how to evaluate images, know the imaging and interventional procedures and how to operate the equipment. The RPA can alleviate the burden for the radiologists by performing fluoroscopic procedures, evaluating images, performing minor invasive procedures, performing patient assessment, interacting with the patient, obtaining consent and providing an internal technical report for the radiologist. While other health profession specialties have enjoyed the services of a physician extender, the RPA fills this function in radiology services, assisting the radiologists with their work burden.

Current Status:

Currently there are graduate RPAs or RPA students located in forty two (42) states and one practicing in Jamaica. The graduates are working for various types of radiology practice groups, including rural and urban settings, in Indian Health Service and Veteran's Administration facilities, in one-radiologist-type practices to radiology groups with multiple partners, in medical centers, clinics and imaging centers.

Departments utilizing RPAs have found the schedule of fluoroscopic procedures is more closely followed and more time is spent with the patients explaining procedures and providing information, which enhances patient satisfaction. The technologists refer questions to the RPA, preventing interruptions of the radiologists. Overall, the department becomes more efficient, allowing more patients to receive radiology services.