

The Role of Allied Health Professionals in Providing High-Quality Care

Modern health care is a team venture.

And more often than not, the first person a patient meets in any setting or type of care is a highly skilled allied health professional. These are the therapists, scientists, technologists, administrators, managers, and assistants who comprise the backbone of our health care workforce. Their role in providing optimal patient care and satisfaction is critical, indispensable, and distinct from medical, nursing, and dental professionals.

Allied health professionals support diagnosis, recovery, and quality of life. They provide direct patient care in virtually every specialty; deliver scientific support in clinical laboratories; offer numerous rehabilitation services; manage and provide data critical to seamless patient care and diagnosis; operate sophisticated diagnostic equipment; contribute to broader public health outcomes; provide critical care support in intensive care units; develop hospital and educational nutrition programs; illustrate medical textbooks; and more.

More than five million allied health care practitioners – nearly 60 percent of all U.S. health care providers – contribute to the nation’s health. These professionals are fully integrated members of every health care team, in outpatient and inpatient settings, in primary, acute, and chronic care. And as traditional practices continue to merge into large, multi-provider groups in the wake of health care reform, and health services are increasingly pressured to deliver high quality, accessible, and timely care despite limited resources, collaborative efforts among physicians, nurses, and allied health providers becomes ever more essential for effective patient care.

This alliance of essential health care partners has demonstrated improved health outcomes wherever it is utilized. In the country’s rural areas, a distinct lack of allied health services may limit appropriate patient care that can increase mobility and independence.

Patients have complex needs. By collaboratively working to identify, evaluate, prevent, and treat diseases, disabilities, and disorders, allied health practitioners greatly influence health care delivery. As advocates for patients, they often are the first to recognize problems and frequently serve as safety nets. Their sense of patient care accountability adds tremendous value to the health care team.

Continued health care diversity and specialization has created a need for allied health services that enhance and extend health care. Allied health professionals continue to expand their scope as medical philosophy shifts to one focused on preventive care. There are now nearly 100 distinct allied health professions populated by practitioners with advanced education and clinical training, nationally credentialed through certification, registration, and/or licensure.

The U.S. health care system faces many challenges. Well into the 2020s, demand for health care workers in the United States will continue to grow nearly twice as fast as the national economy, creating an enormous need for new and existing professionals and disciplines. Factors such as an



aging population, population growth, practitioner shortages, an increase in chronic conditions, access to care, and cost of care will contribute to a critical mandate for trained professionals.

Augusta University's College of Allied Health Sciences is well poised to help fill these openings, offering 13 undergraduate and graduate degrees and two post-baccalaureate certificates in 11 programs: clinical laboratory science, dental hygiene, health management and informatics, medical illustration, nuclear medicine technology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, physician assistant, public health, radiation therapy, and respiratory therapy. Additional degrees and programs, such as bachelor's and doctoral degrees in health sciences and nutrition, plus expanded public health offerings, are in development for implementation within next two years.

*November 2014
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