Extending Your Career
Nonphysician radiology extenders offer exciting, evolving options for career advancement.
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By M. Diane Newham, MS, RT(R)(M)(CT)(QM)

The U.S. has an aging population beset by obesity, diabetes mellitus and chronic heart disease. These people need good health care, including the diagnostic and therapeutic procedures performed in radiology and other specialties. To meet this growing need, radiologic technologists have stepped up with advanced academic education, clinical skills and abilities-simultaneously elevating their professional status and the state of health care in this country.

What's stopping you from being part of this progressive breed of technologist? You owe it to yourself and your patients to consider advanced certification.

History

Nonphysician radiology extenders date back roughly 40 years. The radiologist assistant (RA) position originated in the 1970s but received relatively little notice, eventually merging with the RA physician assistants (PA) position. However, in 1994, the U.S. military approached Weber State University about launching a midlevel program for radiologic technologists. Although military funding for the program was later diverted, Weber State maintained its radiology practitioner assistant (RPA) program, graduating its first class in 1998. Since no certification was available for these graduates, the Certifying Board for the Radiology Practitioner Assistant (CBRPA) began certifying the RPA and continue to do so. The ARRT registered radiologist assistant (RRA) was developed in 2002.

The first class of RAs graduated in 2005 from California's Loma Linda University. The ARRT recognizes 12 RA programs in the U.S.:

- Bellevue (Wash.) College
- Bloomsburg (Pa.) University
- Loma Linda University
- Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas
- Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Conn.
- Ohio State University, Columbus
- University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock
- University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Newark
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, Boston
- Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond
- Weber State University, Ogden, Utah

Requirements and settings

Individual program requirements differ. RPAs and RRAs are technologists who require an ARRT RT(R) designation to enter these programs; they graduate with a bachelor's or master's degree. Many are multi-credentialed. With different skills, abilities and job descriptions, they serve as an extension of the radiologist, allowing him to be more productive and timely while also improving the quality and continuity of patient care.

Over 500 RPAs and RRAs practice in various settings, from urban academic health care institutions to small rural hospitals and clinics. Several states license these technologists, with some accepting only the RRA credential and others accepting both. Many RPAs have become RRAs so they can practice in their states. The RPA has a unique Health Care Provider Taxonomy Code or NPI number that identifies the RPA as a health care provider recognized by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

Perseverance

The RA and RPA persevere through growth, change and evolution. Within the past year:

- The National Society of Radiology Practitioner Assistants (NSRPA), a professional RPA organization, changed its name to the Society of Radiology Physician Extenders (SRPE) to include RPAs and RRAs;

- The Radiology Practitioner Assistant Society (RPAS) formed to support the position.

- The ASRT House of Delegates will be guiding the RRA scope of practice and a new RA chapter:

- The ARRT Entry-Level Clinical Activities (ELCA) document reflects transformation resulting from the most recent job analysis of the RRA.

Emerging providers

Moreover, other nonphysician midlevel providers are budding in nuclear medicine and cardiology. The nuclear medicine midlevel provider-the nuclear medicine advanced associate (NMAA)-is now offered by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences is collaboration with the University of Missouri-Columbia (UMC) and Saint Louis University (SLU).

Another inkling of adaptation: the development and 2008 unveiling of a curriculum for the advanced level cardiology specialist assistant through a report of the International Society of Advanced Level Medical Imaging Physician Specialists (ALMIPS) and the Committee on Training and Competency Standards.[3,4] This specialized nonphysician practitioner-termed the registered cardiovascular specialist assistant (RCSA)-would aid in the performance of cardiac catheterization, as well as coronary and noncoronary cardiac interventions.

The first RCSA program is slated to open in 2011 at Edison College, Ft. Myers, Fla. Students will be trained to perform cardiovascular procedures on virtual patients before assisting on actual patients. Cardiologist groups in 12 hospitals in Southwest Florida have supported the program's development at Edison.

The RCSA's certification exam process, which will formally begin in 2012, requires a passing score of 87 percent on the written test and a minimum rating of excellence for performing procedures on the virtual patient.

Evolving opportunities

Yes, the mid-level technological professions are growing and changing-and not without bumps along the way, as new options and technologies arise. These midlevel technologists will continue breaking new ground and improving their professions. Advanced practitioners in the imaging sciences have come a long way, with more advancement still to come.

For references, please visit the Magazine section of www.advanceweb.com/imaging.

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