



Finding

BY ASHLEY KENT

Something was not quite right from the beginning.

There was that awkward dinner with the physician and his wife when there was talk about numerous other PAs coming and going from the practice. And there was no mention of an employment contract.

But she was unemployed and desperate to get a foot in the door in that specialty, so she ignored her gut and accepted the position. Not surprisingly, things went downhill from there.

“He didn’t treat me like a partner,” the PA said. “He never really communicated. He never brought me into his office and talked about anything. There was no recognition that I was even there as a PA. I would walk in the room and the patients would say, ‘Who are you?’” Despite not having received an employment contract, the physician did present her with a non-compete contract, which she never signed. “I want to be a valuable part of a physician-PA team, and I was not [when I was] there,” she said.

“Excitement and eagerness to fit what the physician employer is looking for can often cloud good judgment, even for the seasoned PA,” said Lisa Shock, PA-C, who owns Utilization Solutions in Healthcare Inc., a consulting company for practices who want to integrate PAs into their teams. Shock said the relationship between PAs and physicians is critical. “I think that clear communication and meaningful collaboration are the underlying foundations to everything the physician/PA team will do,” said Shock, who is also associate faculty at the Duke PA program and works part time in primary care in rural North Carolina.

“The most important quality I think a PA should look for is integrity,” said Robert Hollingsworth, DHSc, MS, PA-C, owner of Red Springs Family Medicine Clinic in North Carolina, and a PA for 30 years. “The supervisor you choose should be honest, ethical and should trust you.” PAs should remember that interviewing is a two-way dialogue. Not only are they being evaluated by the potential employer/supervisor, but also they should take that opportunity to take a good look at the role they will fill and how they feel about working for the person they are getting ready to be employed by.”

What PAs Should Look for
in a Physician Partner

Dr. Right



Lisa Shock, PA-C

Questions to Ask Your Potential Physician Partner (and Yourself) During the Interview

By Jennifer Anne Hohman, AAPA's director of professional advocacy

The only way a PA can find out if there is the potential for a good fit with a physician is to meet them, ask them about their practice and patients and be alert to clues.

- Does the physician listen and communicate well?
- How much do they know about PAs?
- Do you get the sense that they will be accessible and available?
- Are collegiality, compassion and service guiding principles? Or does the bottom line seem to take precedence?
- What are their clinical expectations of you? Do they fit with what you'd like to do in this position?
- Will there be opportunities for your growth and development?
- Do they seem like they'd be good mentors if you are in a new practice area?
- If you are a seasoned practitioner, do you sense they will give you appropriate autonomy?
- Are there physicians on staff who may not want to work with PAs? This could signal trouble ahead. Physicians in a group setting need to agree about hiring a PA and be open to teaming with you. All it takes is one bad apple who resents PAs to undermine collegiality, team work and your happiness at a job.

- Are they familiar with the legalities of working with a PA in their state, and if new to PAs, committed to setting up your team practice properly in accord with regulatory agency requirements?

Hohman added that once an employment offer is made, discussions about employment contracts should immediately follow. "If no contract is forthcoming, or a very employer-centric one is insisted upon with little room for your input, these are red flags for a potentially dysfunctional employment relationship ahead," she said. For assistance with interviewing, contract negotiation and other professional development skills, contact Jennifer at jhohman@aapa.org or 571-319-4351.

Knowledge. Integrity. Compassion.

Two Physicians Share the Qualities They Seek in PAs

PA Professional spoke with two physicians who have worked with PAs to find out what physicians are looking for in a practice partner. Razelle Kurzrock, MD, FACP, of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, and Daniel Hassell, MD, of Greensboro Radiology in Greensboro, N.C., talked about team medicine and the qualities they want in a PA.



Razelle Kurzrock, MD, FACP

How long have you worked with PAs, and what has been your experience with them as members of the health care team?

RK: I first worked with PAs in the early 1980s. My experience with them has been outstanding. They are knowledgeable, well-trained and hardworking.

DH: Since 1998, when I joined Greensboro Radiology. The PAs allow us to extend our reach and serve more patients than we could on our own. They are our personal representatives in our stead, and as such provide the "face" of radiology to referring physicians, staff, and patients.

How important is a flourishing physician-PA team to the level of patient care you are able to provide?

RK: In our department [PAs and NPs]...are critical to the level of patient care. Patients with cancer have very complex problems, and we simply could not provide this level of care if we did not have them—it would really be like somebody amputating your right hand.

DH: The teamwork between PA and physician is critical. Trite as it may sound, communication is key. I would suggest any PA strive to have the physician articulate clearly their ideas and wishes, make sure they are understood, and receive regular feedback regarding performance based on those standards.

What are the top qualities that you look for in a PA?

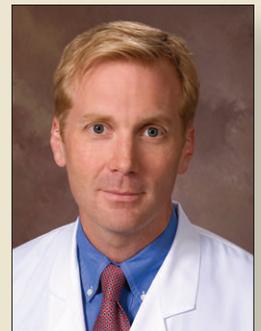
RK: I look for a PA who is knowledgeable and has common sense. I want to work with someone who can solve problems independently, but at the same time knows when to ask questions. It is important to me that a PA genuinely care about his/her patients and be responsive to them. Also, they need a "can-do" attitude. I would not hesitate to hire a brand new graduate, and some of my best experiences have been with new graduates. If the references are outstanding, and the person is committed, smart and industrious even as a new graduate, they will do a fine job.

DH: The critical factors are dependability and integrity. Important factors are compassion, motivation, efficiency, and an ability to interact well with physicians, patients and staff.

Which qualities would prevent you from hiring a PA?

RK: What applies to PAs really applies to many hires. I personally am hesitant to hire people who move around every year. I believe that if their previous jobs consistently did not keep them happy, we will not be able to satisfy them as well.

DH: Inflexibility, dishonesty, poor communication skills, apathy, or



Daniel Hassell, MD

Jennifer Anne Hohman, AAPA's director of professional advocacy, recommended that PAs enter into a new employment situation with a clear vision of what they're looking for in a physician partner.

"Perhaps in common with many types of relationship, knowing who you are and what you want is so important," Hohman said. "Making a list of desired qualities is a great exercise for PAs for this reason. That list might be informed by ideals of clinical excellence and compassion as well as by experiences with physicians who were not good to work with, who in retrospect offer hard-earned lessons in what to avoid."



Ijeoma Perkins, MHS, PA-C

Ijeoma Perkins, MHS, PA-C, met her physician partner during the interview process and thought the two of them would be a good match. Three months into her employment, she noticed that the physician-PA relationship was lacking both communication and collaboration. "We never had meetings to discuss concerns or monthly meetings required for [PAs and NPs and

physicians]. There were many situations in which I had questions about his thoughts on patient treatment plans and he would answer, 'because I said so.' This was the biggest red flag, because I come from a PA program that has evidence-based teaching and being a recent graduate I was very eager to learn; instead I was told what to do." Perkins has since moved on to a new job in family medicine with a physician who treats her with respect and utilizes her to her full capacity.

Key Values

Hohman offered up these top qualities of physicians who make great team members:

- Someone who understands the potential of team practice and is willing to delegate broadly yet be available for a PA's questions
- Someone who truly cares about patients and the quality of their care
- Someone with emotional intelligence who values other clinicians and co-workers as part of the same cause of providing excellent and compassionate treatment

Shock advised PAs to evaluate what they're looking for in a physician at various stages of their career, as the qualities will likely change over time.

"At different stages in your career, just like in life, you may need a little more direct, hands-on supervision, especially if you are a new graduate or new to your job or specialty. As you are gaining experience, you might want your doc to have a little more oversight and have closer collaboration in the clinical environment. Whereas if you've been practicing in a specialty for 10 or 20 years, and you have a longstanding relationship with your physician, you are no longer in that honeymoon period, and you may be autonomous in clinic and fairly independent in your clinical judgment. When you have a longer history of team care together, you always know that your doc is there if you need them."

"As a new graduate, it would be helpful to have someone who can work with me one-on-one, is very patient, and willing to teach as well as constantly providing me with constructive feedback," said Sola Ogunniyi, MHS, PA-C, who recently graduated from the Duke University PA program. "During my search for



Sola Ogunniyi, MHS, PA-C

"Perhaps in common with many types of relationships, knowing who you are and what you want is so important," Hohman said. "Making a list of desired qualities is a great exercise for PAs for this reason."

an inability to assimilate new knowledge and information would represent significant negatives when considering an applicant.

Are there any steps you take to get to know PAs as you are deciding whether to hire them?

RK: For me, their references are important. It is also helpful if I have previously worked with them in another context.

DH: Knowing someone personally is the most useful component of a successful hire. This can be achieved by shadowing extant PAs. One of our PAs was an MR tech before going to PA school and since we knew her well already, we were keen to keep her in the fold. Recommendations from a well-known source are useful, but do not substitute for personal knowledge of the applicant's dependability and integrity.

What would you advise PAs who feel they are stuck in an unfruitful physician-PA relationship?

DH: It would be important to determine the key problem elements and whether they are correctable. A poor fund of knowledge and experience can be remedied. Interpersonal difficulties can usually be surmounted with work and understanding. Discordant ideas regarding patient care or work habits may be more problematic. Ultimately, no one needs to remain in an unacceptable situation if the likelihood of improvement seems remote. There are many types and personalities of physicians and of PAs and of job situations, and it is important to find the right match.



employment, I have had a couple of interviews and all of them, except one, I have actually met with the supervising physician. I really liked one physician because she talked about taking time to show me the ropes and initially see patients with me until I was very comfortable. She seemed really willing to teach and mentor me. One physician seemed to want me to fill in the time that the other PA would be away and advised me to have a couple of part time jobs, which was a red flag for me.”

Ogunniyi said one practice allowed her to interact with other clinical and non-clinical staff during the interview. “I would recommend that other PAs do this if there is time and opportunity to do so. It will help you see the how the staff relate with one another and with the physician, and if they like working there or not.”

While speaking with other staff is a bonus, Hohman said interviewing with the physician is critical. “[It is] a red flag if they can only speak with the practice manager or other employees—it does not bode well for the accessibility of the physicians you’ll be working with!” she said.

During the physician interview, Hohman recommends asking the right questions (See her advice on page 16). Physician responses will clue PAs in as to whether the physician-PA relationship will be a good one.

Hohman added that conducting thorough research on both the physician and the practice is essential.

“Have they worked with PAs before and if so how well did they retain them? High turnover is a worrisome sign. Does the practice employ family members? Spouses serving as practice managers can create difficult dynamics for PAs, with physicians being reluctant to go to bat for the PA in terms of salary or other contract or practice issues the practice manager op-

“Find someone who will help you grow professionally. Find someone you can learn from. Your career and your reputation will depend on it,” Hollingsworth said.

poses,” Hohman said. “Researching an employer for malpractice claims and community reputation is a good idea, too.”

Shock emphasized that PAs should take their time making sure the relationship is the right one because it will directly affect patient care.

“It’s like a marriage really. Clinically, you’re going to cover your doc, your doc is going to cover you, [and] you’re going to give great care together. Liability-wise, you’re going to do things that affect each other.” She noted that this is even more crucial for less experienced PAs. “If you feel badly about asking your doc a question or feel like you’re bothering them, or feel like they’re not going to respond or answer your page, then you are more likely to do something, or wait on something, that could be critical for that patient, especially in a hospital or surgical setting.”

Hohman noted that the team relationship is also evident to patients. “Patients appreciate being cared for by a well-coordinated team. It is reassuring for patients to know that PA and physician are on the same page and sharing their talents and time to treat them.”

Not only does it affect patient care, but the physician-PA relationship also affects every PA’s professional growth. “Given the team-based nature of PA practice, the quality of relationship/partnership with physicians is indeed key to a PA’s success at a given job,” Hohman said.

“If the relationship between the PA and the [physician] doesn’t allow for the growth of the PA, not only in the practice, but socially and professionally, then it isn’t worth any amount of money,” Hollingsworth said. “Find someone who will help you grow professionally. Find someone you can learn from. Your career and your reputation will depend on it.”

But even if you make what you feel is an informed decision, sometimes the professional relationship might not evolve in the way you would like. “Sometimes despite your best efforts, the match will not be a good one and you’ll need to move on,” Hohman said. “As a precaution, be sure that your employment contract does not make your departure onerous. Watch out for highly restrictive non-compete clauses and overly long termination notice periods. If you find yourself in a position that is burning you out, failing to foster your growth, treating you unfairly or engaging in unethical practices, you’ll want to move on with grace and professionalism.”

Perkins offered this piece of advice for other PAs as she reflected on her previous dysfunctional physician-PA relationship: “I would have held my standards higher and really taken my time before rushing into a job. Never do it for the money because happiness is priceless.” **PA**