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## Accrue Healthcare Experience and Patient Care Experience Before Applying to PA School

*Understand the Differences and Obtain Your Hours*

By Brian Palm, PA-C

Accruing [Healthcare Experience \(HCE\)](#) and Patient Care Experience (PCE) hours is one of the most time-intensive aspects of [applying to PA school](#). There are many ways to obtain these patient-related work hours, but first, we need to differentiate between HCE and PCE.

The Central Application Service for PAs (CASPA) defines HCE as: “Both paid and unpaid work in a health or health-related field where you are not directly responsible for a patient’s care, but may still have patient interaction; for example, filling prescriptions, performing clerical work, delivering patient food, cleaning patients and/or their rooms, administering food or medication, taking vitals or other record keeping information, working as a scribe, certified nursing assistant (CNA) (depending on job description), medical assistant, etc.”

PCE is similar, but you “are directly responsible for a patient’s care. For example, prescribing medication, performing procedures, directing a course of treatment, designing a treatment regimen, actively working on patients as a nurse, paramedic, EMT, CNA, phlebotomist, physical therapist, dental hygienist, etc.”

Now that we have an understanding of the differences between the two types of hours you’ll need to apply to PA school, let’s take a look at some ways to accumulate these necessary hours.

### **Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) – PCE/HCE**

This is one of the most common ways that PA school applicants obtain their necessary HCE/PCE hours. While the official title says “certified,” there are some facilities that will hire you for a nursing assistant position without a certification. Every facility is different, so talk to potential employers. To

obtain your certification (recommended), you'll need to have a high school diploma or GED and complete a training course. Typically, these courses are offered at community colleges and technical schools, and take about six weeks to complete.

### **Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) – PCE**

Another common way to accumulate hours for your PA school application. If you don't know, EMTs are quite versatile in the types of work they're able to do, and work either on an ambulance, fire truck, or within a healthcare facility or hospital. Many times, they are able to start IVs, administer medications, and help provide care to patients – though, as always, each facility differs. EMT training can last anywhere from three weeks to six months depending on the program.

### **Physical Therapy Aide – HCE**

A great entry-level position to help get your foot in the door! According to the American Physical Therapy Association: “Physical Therapy Aides work as part of a team with Physical Therapists and implement selected components of patient/client interventions (treatment), obtain data related to the interventions provided, and make modifications in selected interventions either to progress the patient/client as directed by the physical therapist or to ensure patient/client safety and comfort.” Job responsibilities vary based on the facility, but you'll be exposed to the medical field and earn healthcare experience.

### **Pharmacy Technician – HCE**

Some pharmacies will hire applicants without a nationally recognized certification, but others will require that applicants have some sort of education or training. If you do decide to obtain certification, program lengths vary anywhere between three months and two years. Keep in mind, though, that a pharmacy technician's responsibilities lie within the pharmacy itself and won't give you any exposure to patient care.

### **Patient Care Technician (PCT) – PCE**

A *very* versatile position! Job responsibilities and requirements vary entirely based on the facility. For example, in an emergency room, you may have PCTs who are also registered paramedics, CNAs, EMTs, or who have no certifications whatsoever. But PCTs can work in all different types of specialties. As a PCT, you're typically able to take vital signs, help assist nurses in the care of patients, apply splints to fractures, help in traumas and cardiac arrests – and that's only the beginning! This is a great position to help expose you to the different facets of healthcare.

However you decide to obtain the necessary hours to help you on your way to becoming a PA, be sure to learn as much as you can about healthcare in general and the PA profession specifically. Having a job in which you have the opportunity to interact with patients may also give you a chance to see PAs in action as well.

If you're planning on becoming a PA, consider [joining AAPA as a pre-PA member](#) to stay ahead of the curve. AAPA provides pre-PA members many exclusive discounts and benefits to help you learn about the profession, get ready for your interviews, and more. Check out [our application timeline and checklist](#) (so you don't miss any steps!) and all [CASPAs deadlines](#) in one handy cheat sheet.

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