

For an ancient land, a new profession

Israeli healthcare introducing physician assistants

By HILLEL KUTTNER

RAVIV AVRAHAM made the rounds of patients lying on gurneys one recent morning in the emergency department of a hospital in northern Israel, the experience as new for him as is his profession in the country.

Avraham is shifting careers to become a physician assistant, an unknown field in Israel in a medical community dominated by doctors and nurses. The PA profession

Manitoba and Ontario.

In Israel, as elsewhere, the PA model is considered an attractive, cost-effective option to address the shortages of medical professionals in underserved areas, especially rural ones. For PAs in the United States, the field offers professional satisfaction, good pay (averaging nearly \$100,000 annually) and the ability to start working upon completing a two-year, postgraduate PA program, thereby avoiding the time and expense of attending medical school and doing internships. Nearly all American PAs started their careers in other medical fields, such as paramedics.

That was the case with Avraham, a paramedic for 17 years with Magen David Adom, Israel's largest ambulance service.

explaining that his paramedic experience provides a strong grounding for working as a PA in emergency medicine because both demand quickly assessing a situation without a physician present.

Arie Eisenman, a physician who oversees internal medicine in the emergency department of the Galilee Medical Center (GMC), in Nahariya, first was exposed to the PA profession in 2011, when Talia Subin Saka, a student in New York's Touro College PA Program, did a six-week internship there. Under his supervision, she evaluated patients, reviewed test results, took blood, sutured, and spent time in the catheterization lab.

"She taught us things about the profession, and we taught her," Eisenman said.

The experience led the two institutions to formalize a relationship that has brought two Touro PA students to the hospital for more than a month each year.

"It's a new life completely. The time they were here—you felt it right away,"

Eisenman said of the visiting PA students' impact on his emergency room. "The congestion went down by half."

The experience prompted Eisenman to urge Israel's Ministry of Health to adopt the profession to help alleviate the shortage of ER physicians in remote areas like Nahariya, a town of 60,000 people along the Mediterranean coast, six miles from the border with Lebanon.

The ministry agreed and devised a training schedule of classes one or two days a week at Tel Hashomer Hospital, near Tel Aviv, in such specialties as cardiology, immunology, gynecology, neurology, pediatrics, and orthopedics. Three or four days a week, the PAs-in-training work in hospital ERs; Avraham is one of three future PAs based at GMC. Those passing their certification exams in late June will be officially licensed PAs. (The Hebrew term is a precise translation from English.)

The next two cohorts will begin the nine-month training program in October: 66 in emergency medicine and 20 in anesthesiology. Six American PAs moving

to Israel will be among them, but future immigrants who already are PAs may be required to take only a shorter course that introduces them to the Israeli medical system, explained the ministry's senior coordinator of PA training, Udi Gelbshtein.

Academic programs are in the works, too. Two-year, Master's-degree PA programs will commence in October 2018 at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, in Be'er Sheva; and at the Academic College of Tel Aviv, in Jaffa, Gelbshtein said.

Already, the country's leading health-maintenance organizations have expressed interest in the training of people as "community PAs" qualified to visit and treat homebound patients, he added.

"I thought that I could show the doctors and staff what a PA is, but I never thought it would get this far," said Saka, a PA in a dermatology practice near Miami, who hopes to move to Israel. "I'm in shock that the profession is going to be [coming] there."

Before heading home each evening, Eisenman said, he checks with schedulers to see whether any of the three PAs in training will be on duty the next day.

"It's a night-and-day difference the days they're here versus the days they're not," Eisenman said. "If they're not, I'm down. If they are here, I know I'll have someone to discuss cases with. I feel that not all the burden is on my shoulders. It feels like there's another doctor here. I can then concentrate on people who are really sick and need to be seen by a doctor." ■

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To Dr. Arie Eisenman (l.), having Raviv Avraham (r.) and other PAs-in-training in his emergency room is "a night-and-day difference" compared to days when they aren't there. "This is some experience. This is medicine!" says Raviv Avraham of his transition to the profession of physician assistant.

will officially launch in Israel early this summer, when Avraham and 31 others complete their training and take their certification exams.

In the United States, more than 100,000 PAs now practice across the country and in all medical specialties. They examine patients, write prescriptions, suture, are members of surgical teams—all supervised by physicians who may be hundreds of miles away. In the past two decades, the PA profession also began in such countries as Great Britain, South Africa, and the Netherlands. In Canada, the profession is widespread in the military health care system and, for civilians, in the provinces of

Avraham, 40, explained that he's shifting from examining patients in an ambulance to treating them in a hospital—but is doing far more, like reading CT scans, X-rays, ultrasounds, and MRIs, and speaking with patients in greater depth.

Avraham said he sensed greater professional-growth opportunities by becoming a PA.

"This is some experience. This is medicine!" he said. "As a paramedic, 20 percent of the work was medicine, and 80 percent was logistics: moving the patient, organizing the equipment. In the ER, it's all medicine—not that it's more important," Avraham hastened to add,