



# ptaviewpoint

by Shannon Struby, PTA, MA

## Climbing the Career Ladder

*Growth opportunities for PTAs.*

**W**ith APTA's Vision 2020<sup>1</sup> providing the outline to our profession's future, physical therapist assistants (PTAs) are seeking how best to assist physical therapists (PTs) in the years ahead while enhancing our own expertise and advancing our careers. In this pursuit, we look both to our employers and to APTA.

In this month's PTA Viewpoint column, I'd like to describe how my employ-

er, Nebraska Methodist Health System (NMHS), is helping meet the needs of PTAs through educational opportunities and a specially designed career ladder.

NMHS recognizes that PTAs are important care providers, the appropriate and optimal use of whom promotes cost-effective treatment to a higher number of patients while freeing PTs to spend more time examining and diagnosing patients, and engaging in such important pursuits as networking with physicians, completing required documentation, and participating in clinical research. In this thrust I believe NMHS stands out, as employers seldom seem to take such an active interest in enhancing teamwork between PTs and PTAs and advancing PTAs' careers.

NMHS understands that, because PTs rely on PTAs' help with many aspects of patient care, it makes great sense for PTAs to increase their knowledge and skills in the areas of clinical practice in which their supervising PTs concentrate. This facilitates consistent, quality patient care, promotes communication, and reduces costs associated with prolonged and inefficient treatments. (These assets are particularly valuable in rural communities, at satellite clinics, and in skilled nursing facilities—settings in which PTs may be stretched particularly thin, and thus must rely even more heavily on the strengths of their PTAs.) Educational opportunities provided by NMHS are designed to help PTAs progress from entry-level skills to expertise in more advanced techniques.

In June 2004, NMHS introduced a Clinical Ladder for Physical Therapists,

and a Clinical Ladder for Physical Therapist Assistants soon followed. These ladders offer PTs and PTAs growth opportunities that serve not only to enhance patient care, but also to reward PTs and PTAs for going above and beyond their basic job responsibilities. They represent, too, the beginning of an envisioned mentorship program for new and veteran employees who want to increase their knowledge in specific areas, which serves to strengthen the physical therapy community as a whole.

The guidelines of NMHS's Clinical Ladder for Physical Therapist Assistants are similar in many aspects to eligibility requirements for APTA's Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the Physical Therapist Assistant,<sup>2</sup> which not only provides nationwide recognition of clinical advancement, but also is particularly beneficial for PTAs whose employers provide no similar tracks to knowledge enhancement and career advancement. For PTAs to gain "senior" status on the NMHS's clinical ladder, they must have:

- ❖ Five years of clinical experience in the field;
- ❖ Sixty hours of continuing education;
- ❖ Three letters of recommendation;
- ❖ Success with productivity standards for patient care; and,
- ❖ Service experience in three of these areas: health system initiatives and/or committees, speaking engagements either to fellow staff members or in the community, clinical instruction, mentoring, and active participation in professional associations.

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PTAs who are interested in achieving senior status must submit an application that is then reviewed by an advisory board. Successful applicants are interviewed by the Clinical Ladder Board.

The benefits of gaining senior status include an hourly pay differential, paid APTA dues, and five paid educational leave days. Nebraska recently revised its practice act to more clearly define the scope of practice for PTAs and appropriate supervisory and work relationships between PTs and PTAs. NMHS's clinical ladder is consistent with the dictates of the state practice act and does not in any way alter PTAs' scope of work. Rather, it rewards PTAs for their dedication to increasing their experience, knowledge, and skills in patient care.

Clinical ladders such as that offered by NMHS and APTA's Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the PTA are excellent ways to recognize the contributions and advanced knowledge of experienced PTAs. As the profession moves toward realization of Vision 2020, I encourage each and every PTA to help shape the future role of PTAs in the profession and the clinic by pursuing ongoing education and clinical specialization. Also, I encourage all employers to provide meaningful continuing education and clinical ladders that recognize and reward advanced proficiency.

Advanced proficiency can contribute directly to shorter treatment episodes and greater effectiveness of physical therapy intervention. Autonomous PTs of the

year 2020 may expect nothing less from the PTAs they supervise. **PT**

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## References

1. American Physical Therapy Association. APTA Vision Statement for Physical Therapy 2020. (HOD P06-00-24-35). Go to [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org) and click on "Popular Pages—Core Documents."
2. American Physical Therapy Association. PTA Recognition of Advanced Proficiency. For links, go to [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org) and click on "Areas of Interest—Membership & Leadership," then "PTAs."
3. American Physical Therapy Association. CAPTE Accreditation Handbook. Go to [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org) and click on "Areas of Interest—Education Programs," then "Accreditation—CAPTE."



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