Pathologists’ Assistant (P.A.)

Career Description

- Laboratory professionals are the unheralded life savers in medicine.
- Over 70% of diagnostic and treatment decisions made by doctors are based on medical laboratory tests (according to Dr. John Eble, Chief Pathologist at Indiana University Health).
- Pathologists’ assistants provide anatomical and pathology services under the supervision of a pathologist (a physician—either an MD or DO).
- They perform a variety of tasks including gross examination of surgical pathology specimens, frozen section preparation, and performance postmortem exams.
- A Pathologists’ assistant’s duties include dissection and preparation of specimens, obtaining clinical histories, preparing tissues for histologic processing, photographing pertinent gross specimens, performing postmortem exams, conferring with physicians, administrative, supervisory, and teaching duties.
- Pathologists’ assistants work mostly in surgical pathology with fewer of them performing autopsies. This is based largely on the sharp declines in autopsy rates in the United States.
- Pathologists’ assistants work in a variety of settings including hospitals, private labs, forensic pathology labs, reference labs, government healthcare, medical teaching facilities, and businesses.

Becoming a Pathologists’ Assistant

- To attend one of the accredited Pathologists’ Assistant programs, a bachelor’s degree completed in any major with prerequisite courses is needed.
- Most students do come from academic backgrounds such as biology, chemistry, or clinical laboratory science. An interest in the anatomic aspect of pathology is a must.
- Programs generally consist of a year of courses and 10-12 months of clinical work.
- Once clinical training is successfully completed, you must pass the national certification exam and be licensed in your state as an American Society of Clinical Pathology PA (ASCP).
- Most programs take 22-24 months and result in a master’s degree.

Prerequisite Courses

- Although PA (ASCP) programs do not have a standard set of requirements, many similarities in their requirements do exist.
- Initial courses are similar to other professional health care fields such as MD programs, but some further courses are required.
- Course requirements can vary substantially between programs. Research possible programs of interest early in your academic career to make sure requirements are met.

Common Prerequisite Courses (requirements determined by each graduate program)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Purdue Equivalent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Intro Biology with lab</td>
<td>BIOL 11000-11100 or 13100 &amp; 23100 &amp; 23200 (lab)</td>
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<td>Anatomy &amp; Physiology</td>
<td>BIOL 20300-20400 or BIOL 30100-30200</td>
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<td>Microbiology with lab</td>
<td>BIOL 22100 or 43800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>General Chemistry with lab</td>
<td>CHM 11500-11600 or CHM 12901 or equivalent</td>
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<td>Organic Chemistry with lab (recommend 2 semesters)</td>
<td>CHM 25500-25600 or 26100-26200 or 26505-26605 or MCMP 20400-20500</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
<td>BCHM 30700 or 56100 or CHM 33300 or 33900 or CHM 53300</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>ENGL 10600 or 10800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Possible Subjects</td>
<td>Additional Biology, English, Math, Physics, Ethics</td>
<td>Histology, Cell Biology, Genetics, Statistics, Physics, Biomedical Ethics, Technical Writing</td>
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</table>
Job Outlook

- The demand for PAs (ASCP) is growing.
- Many laboratories nationwide are facing manpower shortages.
- PAs work in hospitals, academic centers, private pathology laboratories, medical research centers, and medical examiner offices.
- Salaries range from $75,000-90,000 and most students are employed before leaving their graduate program.

Preparation

- Shadow a PA (ASCP) to make sure this is the right field and you truly understand what a Pathologists’ assistant does.
- Take an aptitude test if it is needed to apply to the graduate program(s) of interest to you.
- Both the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and/or the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) are generally accepted.
- If English is not your first language, a TOEFL exam may also be required.

Applying

- Application is made directly with the schools you would like to attend.
- Early application is recommended as many programs take only a handful of students.

Fee Assistance

- Visit specific school websites to learn if fee assistance is offered.
- GRE Fee Reduction Program https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/fees/reductions/
- MCAT Fee Assistance through the AAMC https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/applying-medical-school-process/fee-assistance-program/

More Information

- American Association of Pathologists’ Assistants http://www.pathassist.org/
- What is a Pathologists’ Assistant? http://www.pathassist.org/?page=AboutUs_WhatIsAPA
- American Society for Clinical Pathology http://www.ascp.org
- National Accrediting Association for Clinical Laboratory Sciences http://www.naacls.org/

Programs in the Region

Indiana University Pathologists’ Assistant M.S. Program Indianapolis, IN http://pathology.medicine.iu.edu/education/graduate/graduate-tracks/pathologists-assistant/
Rosalind Franklin University Pathologists’ Assistant M.S. Program North Chicago, IL https://rosalindfranklin.edu/academics/college-of-health-professions/degree-programs/pathologists-assistant-ms/
Wayne State University Pathologists’ Assistant Program Detroit, MI http://cphs.wayne.edu/pathologists-assistant/

Information for this career guide came from the above websites and the Pathologists’ Assistant page at Explore Health Careers website http://explorehealthcareers.org/en/Career/119/Pathologists_Assistant