

First physician assistants graduate University

By Laura Thompson

A new class of health professionals are working in hospitals and family practices across Ontario following the completion of their training through McMaster University's physician assistant education program.

Twenty-one graduates received their Bachelor of Health Sciences (Physician Assistant) degrees during convocation ceremonies Nov. 19, 2010.

The new breed of health-care workers, who work directly under the supervision of a physician, are now employed in range of specialties including emergency medicine, family medicine, internal medicine, critical care and orthopedic surgery at hospitals and health care centres from Windsor to Ottawa.

"Our physician assistant graduates are exceptional ambassadors of this new profession," said Dr. John Cunnington, assistant dean of the physician assistant program.

"Through their commitment to excellence and collaborative care, they have positioned themselves as essential members of today's interprofessional health-care teams. Their McMaster foundation in problem-based, small-group learning will serve them well as they move forward in their careers."

Employment opportunities for physician assistant (PA) graduates were announced this past summer by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The ministry provided grants to support the hiring of PAs as part of an overall strategy to reduce wait times and improve access to patient care in high-need areas.

"The physician assistant role is one of several new roles we have introduced as part of our government's collaborative Health Human Resources Strategy," said Deb Matthews, Ontario's Minister of Health and Long-Term Care. "I'm pleased to support these graduates and look forward to further expanding this valuable patient care role."

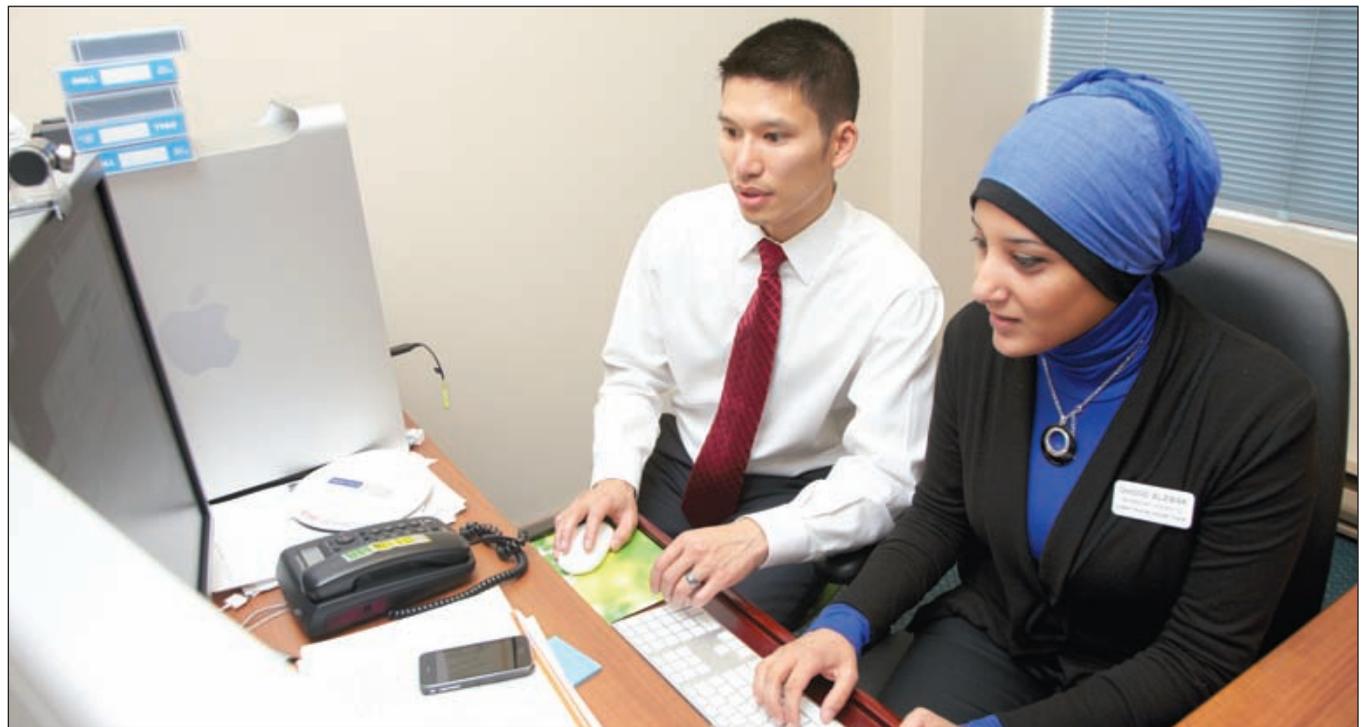
Ohood Elzibak, a 23-year-old Hamiltonian and McMaster alumna, was drawn to the PA program out of her desire to work in a clinical setting and pioneer a new role in health care.

"I felt very confident going down this route," she said. "I felt like this was the right role for me, and I knew I needed to explore that."

"It's been a phenomenal two years. You develop a really close relationship with your classmates, the facilitators and the staff. We were all in this together. It was a new experience for everyone."

During her clerkship year, Elzibak discovered a passion for the intense, fast-paced operating room environment during a two-month rotation with Dr. Ivan Wong, an orthopedic surgeon at Hamilton Health Sciences. Elzibak was hired by Wong as the first physician assistant member of his surgical team.

Wong, an assistant professor of surgery at McMaster, had previously worked with PAs during his fellowship training in the United States. Physician



Physician assistant student Ohood Elzibak and her supervising physician orthopedic surgeon Dr. Ivan Wong in his office in Hamilton Ontario.

assistants have been part of the U.S. health-care system since the 1960s.

In Canada, the health-care workers have been employed by the Canadian military for several decades. They were introduced into the civilian health care system in 2007 through a joint initiative between the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ontario Medical Association. PAs also train at the University of Toronto and the University of Manitoba.

"In the future, I see just about every orthopedic surgeon working with PAs, and sometimes multiple ones," Wong said. "In the United States, it's already been shown many times that PAs improve the cost-effectiveness of practice, increase patient care as well as patient satisfaction."

Mark MacLeod, president of the Ontario Medical Association, also reflected that sentiment in a statement that congratulated the graduates and commended the introduction of the new PA role and the impact it will have on health care.

"Ontario's doctors are long time supporters of PAs," he said. "PAs are valuable contributors to our health care system because Ontario's doctors know that when all health care providers work together, patients benefit from an enhanced level of care."

Physician assistants are health-care professionals who work under the supervision of doctors to provide care. PAs take histories, conduct physical examinations, order and interpret tests, diagnose and treat illnesses, counsel on preventive health care and may assist in surgery, depending on the specialty of their supervising physician. A PA's practice may also include education, research and administration.

Launched in September 2008, McMaster's consecutive 24-month program was founded upon the problem-based learning model of the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine. The first year of study focuses on the clinical sciences supporting health-care delivery. In the second year, PA students rotate

through clinical placements.

The inaugural physician assistant class of 21 students was selected from a pool of more than 250 applicants. The students came from diverse backgrounds including paramedic practice, social work, genetics, epidemiology, journalism and engineering.

In addition to all completing the

program, the inaugural PA graduates have also successfully transitioned to employment in Ontario.

Laura Thompson is Editor, Public Relations, in the Faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University in Hamilton.

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