The SDPA Diplomate Fellowship, Standardizing Education and Raising the Bar

The SDPA has launched the Diplomate Fellowship, the premier training program for dermatology PAs.

BY AMBER BLAIR, PA-C, AND KRISTIN RYGG, PA-C

As healthcare in America evolves and the population of the country ages, the growing physician shortage becomes increasingly impactful. This dichotomous change escalates the demand for other medical providers to expand and diversify their roles. Non-physician providers, such as Physician Assistants (PAs), rapidly find themselves sub-specializing in fields such as dermatology, even though their education was focused primarily on general medicine. PAs who enter the dermatology field have very few options when it comes to standardized post-graduate training programs that provide comprehensive education on the core foundations of dermatology. Until recently, PAs depended on supervising physicians and employers to provide this training. Although this facilitates a strong relationship between the physician and PA, it can create a vast degree of subjectivity and variance within the quality of the educational process. With higher pay and fewer jobs, coupled with the sheer competitiveness of the field of dermatology, many PAs take positions despite inadequate training protocols. The Society of Dermatology Physician Assistants (SDPA) has recognized these challenges and recently launched a solution.

In June 2017, the SDPA launched the Diplomate Fellowship, the premier training program for dermatology PAs.

The Diplomate Fellowship was designed to deliver a high quality, standardized, didactic training program, which will ensure dermatology PAs have the skills, tools, and knowledge base required to excel in the field. The SDPA’s goal, through this all-encompassing program, is to raise the bar of the PA’s mastery of dermatology. Additionally, the Fellowship is an invaluable tool for physicians to provide an excellent, affordable complement to in-office practical training for new dermatology PAs, as well as enhance the skill set of experienced PAs.

The Diplomate Fellowship consists of 22 online didactic training modules, each of which contains a number of presentations on specific topics. The program relies on utilizing the textbook *Dermatology Essentials* by Bologna et. al., as its primary resource. The Fellowship comprehensively reviews the entire text, from the Basics of Dermatology, Neoplasms, Vesiculobullous Disorders, to Surgery, Dermoscopy, Dermatopathology, and much more. The modules were authored and developed by many of dermatology’s leading physicians, PAs, and key opinion leaders from across the country, in conjunction with a rigorous board review and approval process for quality and accuracy. Additionally, there are specific objectives and corresponding test questions to provide a standardization of learning. Each module can be purchased separately and may be completed in any order to allow the PA to move at their own pace; however, the entire program must be completed within two years once started.

When fully released, the Diplomate Fellowship will contain over 65 hours of American Academy of Dermatology (AAPA) approved CME credits.

PAs who complete the program will have the elite designation of “Diplomate Fellow,” providing elevated standing within the SDPA and the dermatology community, as well access to conference discounts and additional perks. The SDPA built the Fellowship with national accreditation standards in mind and plans to seek accreditation to confirm its adherence to rigor-
PAs Working Together to Achieve Diplomate Status

Considering the challenges of the practicing dermatology PA, including caring for patients in a full-time clinic, meticulous charting, keeping abreast of the latest in medicine, and maintaining licensing requirements, taking on the additional task of completing the Diplomate Fellowship program might feel daunting. One way to make it less so is to develop study groups like Kristin Rygg, Director at Large for the Florida Society of Dermatology Physician Assistants (FSDPA), an affiliate chapter of the SDPA, has done. Ms. Rygg developed a support network for PAs working towards obtaining their Diplomate Fellow status with a goal for the group to complete the program in January 2018. Participants are being provided support structures to help them set weekly and monthly goals; they receive emails with practical tips, tricks, and discussion points. Most importantly, members are held accountable to each other to maintain a schedule enabling the completion of the Fellowship in the allotted timeframe. Ms. Rygg’s hope is, in working together and creating a latticework of support, this will be an example of how groups can collectively work to improve the quality and standardization of PAs in dermatology across the country through the SDPA’s Diplomate Fellowship program.


If you’re interested in joining the FSDPA study group, or are interested in starting one of your own, please email rygg.kristin@gmail.com or ablair@dermpa.org.

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