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Editorial: California must expand medical support in coronavirus crisis

Chronicle Editorial Board

April 13, 2020

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Photo: Getty Images

Gov. Gavin Newsom has made “meet the moment” a mantra during the coronavirus crisis. He has been impressive in pushing stay-at-home orders, acquiring protective equipment and ventilators, expanding the health care workforce, and keeping the state’s interest above egos and partisan rivalries in collaborating with the Trump White House.

The next step for California would be to ensure that it is optimizing the services of the 13,000 physician assistants in the state. About 80% of the assistants work in hospitals or clinics, where the range of care they provide is often broad. These are the medical professionals with master’s degrees who work under the supervision of doctors, typically performing some of the same functions.

State law requires a physician assistant to have a written practice agreement with a supervising doctor that formalizes the arrangement and scope of his or her duties. The level of supervision varies; it can be light or intensive and remote or in person. A doctor is allowed to supervise no more than four physician assistants.

In ordinary times, that written requirement is not a big burden.

But in moments of emergency — such as the one we’re in — it can unduly limit the availability of professional care. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, 13 states passed

laws that allow the suspension of the supervision requirement in times of natural disaster or emergency.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York, which has almost 17,000 physician assistants, recently issued an executive order to greatly increase the flexibility of physician assistants to operate during the coronavirus crisis.

The group representing California's physician assistants have been asking for a similar nod from the state. In a March 25 letter to Newsom and other top officials, the California Academy of PAs have been asking for the temporary easing of legal requirements that are "impeding the ability of PAs to meet the demand for patient care during this unprecedented public health crisis caused by COVID-19."

The physician assistants' group said its offices "have been flooded from calls and emails from PAs who want to help to the maximum extent possible without a second thought" — but current law leaves them uncertain about what they are allowed to do when crisis presents urgent challenges.

The examples it presented were compelling.

- Two emergency-room physicians contracted COVID-19 in Southern California, effectively sidelining the physician assistants who were under their supervision. "As this example demonstrates, with physicians themselves becoming ill, the ratio of the number of PAs to physicians must be eliminated in times of crisis."
- The rapid setup of temporary care facilities for coronavirus patients, such as the Sheraton Fairplex hotel in Pomona, will result in the staffing of doctors and physician assistants who do not have standing written agreements.
- Doctors are likely to be working outside their specialties during this crisis, thus forcing revisions with their physician assistants under current law.

The last thing Californians would want or need is cumbersome bureaucracy when lives are at stake. As the American Academy of PAs noted in an April 2 letter to Kimberly

Kirchmeyer, director of the state Department of Consumer Affairs, no one is suggesting the waiver of a law that physician assistants “cannot do anything for which they are unqualified or untrained.” But their medical education has given them the skills to “test, diagnose and treat” COVID-19 patients.

They are merely asking for the opportunity to meet the moment. They should get it.