

Testimony of Ana Eliza Souza Cunha

In support of LD 1166 “An Act to Change the Professional Title and Identification of Physician Assistants to Physician Associates”.

Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee, my name is Ana Eliza Souza Cunha. I am originally an Orono resident, where I lived for over twenty-two years and where I received all my education up through my collegiate years. Orono is still my home, where both my parents continue to work and reside. I currently practice medicine in Stamford, Connecticut. However, today, I am testifying in support of LD 1166 “An Act to Change the Professional Title and Identification of Physician Assistants to Physician Associates” for my colleagues here in Maine.

Title change is important because the term "associate" more accurately conveys the PA role. A role where we diagnose, treat, and manage patients, working in collaboration with physicians as peers and reflects that the role has evolved significantly from supporting doctors into independent care providers with broader responsibilities.

In my practice I individually see thirty or more patients a day, conducting skin cancer screenings, skin cancer excisions, and medical management of other skin problems independent of my collaborating physician, referring my patients to them only if their medical problem are beyond my scope of medical training.

Research supports that patients agree with this sentiment. Surveys from the American Academy of PA's found that when patients were asked what name would better fit the PA role, 71% of patients thought “physician associate” matches the PA job description more accurately.

It is important then, especially as our numbers, which were humbly 29,000 in the 1980s to over 178,000 (2023), continue to grow, that we take the time to implement the administrative infrastructure to support the title that best suits our role and aligns with our patient's expectations.

That being said, the name Physician Associate is not a new title and the transition to this title will not hinder current PAs that may have graduated with the outgoing title. My alumna matter, Yale's School of Medicine Physician Associate Program has held the title of “Physician Associate” since the 1970s to embody the partnership between PAs and physicians. I graduated as a Physician Associate on my certificate, and I practice now, without legal hinderance as a PA in the state of Connecticut.

In conclusion, the transition from "Physician Assistant" to "Physician Associate" is a necessary and logical step to more accurately represent the role we play in modern healthcare. This change aligns with patient understanding, reflects our responsibilities which have evolved with time, and ensures that our title keeps pace with the reality of our profession. By adopting this title, Maine will join other institutions that have long recognized the importance of this distinction, reinforcing both clarity and respect for the work we do. I urge you to support LD 1166 and help advance our profession in a way that benefits both providers and patients alike.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ana Eliza Souza Cunha, PA-C

Director-at-Large for the Connecticut Academy of PAs