

Practicing in Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

By Kelly Graham Bocich

AFTER FIRST practicing in primary care, Susan Symington, DFAAPA, MPAS, PA-C, thought she knew a lot about allergies. It wasn't until she decided to specialize in allergy, asthma and immunology and began working at the Arizona Asthma and Allergy Institute in Glendale that she realized just how severe allergies and asthma can be — and what a difference proper diagnosis and treatment can make for these patients.

After earning a bachelor's degree at Western Michigan University, Symington practiced in Michigan for 10 years before deciding she wanted to teach PA students. She earned her MPAS in a distance learning curriculum offered by the University of Nebraska. From there, Symington went on to teach in the PA program at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Mich. She eventually moved to Phoenix to take on the clinical coordinator position at Midwestern University.

Making a Move

"I was a clinical coordinator, which is a tough position," she said. "I decided I wanted to go back to seeing patients full time." She practiced internal medicine and pediatrics for about 2 years before trying a new specialty. "I looked a lot. I chose allergy because it still relates to the family, making it a nice transition. In primary care, a lot of what we see is upper respiratory infections, bronchitis and asthma, so I already had some background there." She sees overlap with specialties like rheumatology and gastroenterology, and notes the value of her primary care background when it comes to picking up on things like thyroid disorders and lupus.

"I try to stress that with students: Get a background in general medicine before



choosing a specialty. It gives you much more insight. I like having the overlap, but I also like being more focused and not having to concentrate on so many other issues," she said.

As part of her transition into allergy and immunology, Symington earned CME with a well-timed workshop from the American Academy of Physician Assistants in Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAPA-AAI). Over the years her involvement with AAPA-AAI grew, and she is now president-elect. When she started working at the Arizona Asthma and Allergy Institute in 2007, each allergist there spent significant one-on-one time with her to enhance her knowledge.

"From there, I started seeing patients," Symington said. "I do a lot of acute care, like exacerbated asthma, hives, and a lot of urgent care, but all related to allergy

practice. When you're in primary care, you think you know a lot about allergies, but when I came here, I found out how severe allergy and asthma can be. We're one of the largest allergy practices in Arizona, and we see the worst of the worst here."

If there is an upside to seeing severe symptoms, it's the difference proper treatment can make, especially in children. "When we do skin testing and find out that a child has allergies, and they also have asthma, half of them experience a clearing of asthma with allergy shots," Symington said. "It's amazing to see how well kids do, because their immune systems are still developing. If we can train the immune system to work appropriately, it can make a big difference."

Professional Goals

Specialty practice in asthma, allergy and immunology does not require an additional certification for PAs or NPs, but certification in asthma education can be earned through the National Asthma Educator Certification Board (NAECB). Particularly because it is a small field, Symington notes the importance of having a professional organization dedicated to the specialty. AAPA-AAI provides CME opportunities, support from other PAs, networking opportunities, and more.

As president, Symington's goals include "increasing visibility and continuing to educate other PAs on understanding when a patient needs to be referred to a specialist in AAI." She also hopes to increase membership in the organization. "Even though we primarily have PAs practicing in allergy, it would be nice to see some in pediatrics and family medicine join and come to some of our CME activities," she said. ■

Education and Certification Options

- ▶ Asthma Education Specialist (AE-C) certification can be earned through the National Asthma Educator Certification Board: <http://naecb.com/>
- ▶ American Academy of Physician Assistants in Asthma, Allergy & Immunology: <http://www.aapa-aaai.com/>
- ▶ American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology: <http://www.aaaai.org/home.aspx>

KELLY GRAHAM BOCICH is on staff at *ADVANCE*. Email her at kbocich@advanceweb.com