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### **Gardner-Webb Physician Assistant (PA) Student Provides Primary Care During Coronavirus**

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# Gardner-Webb Physician Assistant (PA) Student Provides Primary Care During Coronavirus

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Office of University  
Communications

April 30, 2020

## ***Ryan Higgins, '20, Participates in Telemedicine and Direct Patient Care***

Ryan Higgins, of Corvallis, Oregon, a student in the Physician Assistant (PA) Studies program at Gardner-Webb University, is currently participating in a telehealth clinical rotation in California, a state that was one of the early “hot spots” in confirmed Coronavirus cases. Higgins is working in an internal medicine office, providing primary care to patients who are between 40 and 75 years old.

Before the Coronavirus Pandemic, the clinic saw 25 to 30 patients a day. Now, that number is restricted to keep patients safe. Higgins shares his thoughts on providing healthcare during this critical time.



**Q:** What is your current position and job responsibilities?

**Higgins:** As a primary care provider (PCP), our office is home base for many patients, more specifically those with chronic diseases that require medication management and routine labs for surveillance. We also ensure they are keeping up with health screenings, such as colonoscopies, mammograms and vaccines. We perform annual physical exams, order maintenance labs and imaging if needed. Our most important role is we are an open door to patients who need help or have questions if/when they can't get into their specialist.

**Q:** How has your job changed since the pandemic begun?

**Higgins:** My job has changed drastically! We are trying to limit exposure and keep patients safe, especially those with a higher risk, by switching to telemedicine. Normally, we would be able to address 2-3 complaints within the office, but with telemed we have to restrict it to 1-2 complaints. Now, once a week we have in-patient clinic for patients who need to be seen based on their complaints. But it's no more than 5 to 10 per day, since we

are trying to reduce exposure. When we see patients, regardless of their complaint, we have protocols to dress head to toe in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Our goal is to be able to convert all appointments to phone calls, which we are keeping around 35 each day, but again it's not best for all patients.

**Q:** What has the pandemic taught you about patient care, patient interaction, or a new way of medical practice?

**Higgins:** The value of face-to-face encounters, such as the opportunity for patients to bring in their medication bottles when they are unsure of what they are taking since they have over 10 medicines or can't pronounce the complicated names. To be able to listen to their heart and lungs, and see the rash they are concerned about. Handing patients information sheets about various illness/diseases to help educate them. As well, the current situation makes it harder for patient compliance because of the fear of the virus. Less patients are getting necessary labs done, or medication refills for chronic illness. Telemed is great for checking in on a stable patient with normal labs. But for those who need to be seen, this pandemic has caused providers to help from a distance, which is not always the best for everyone.

**Q:** How are patients responding to this new way of interacting with medical providers?

**Higgins:** With telemed, some like the idea of the phone calls and are appreciative we are not making them come into the clinic. However, there are the others who want to see the provider and will have to wait longer to be seen in clinic due to the reduced number of days providers are seeing in-clinic appointments.

**Q:** Why did you chose to become a PA?

**Higgins:** I wanted to be a part of one of the most in-demand medical professions in the United States and to start making an impact within my community in a shorter amount of time. I felt that being a PA is a better fit for my personality, because I will be working together as a team to bring great healthcare to individuals. Finally, I wanted to have the ability to be able to experience different fields of medicine, and being a PA, I'm allowed that flexibility.

**Q:** How did the PA faculty and your GWU classes prepare you for this job?

**Higgins:** Each brought a unique perspective to the classroom that helped untangle medicine to break it down and make it more understandable. They incorporated their styles within their teachings to help build a foundation of medicine that I would later build on within my studies and real-world experiences from rotations.

**Q:** What part of your preparation has been the most helpful as you care for patients?

**Higgins:** GWU provided me the knowledge to be successful and the practice to reinforce that knowledge. Prior to going to PA school, I worked as a medical assistant and this provided me the confidence and comfort to talk to patients. The experience allowed me to

improve on my interpersonal skills and subtle tactics to help patients feel more welcomed and at ease working with me.

[Learn more about the Physician Assistant Studies Program.](#)