What is a Physical Therapist Assistant?
Physical therapist assistants (PTAs) work as members of the health care team to provide physical therapy services under the direction and supervision of a physical therapist (PT). The PT is responsible for the patient evaluation and development of a plan of care to help the patient reduce pain, improve his ability to move, restore function, and reduce or prevent disability. PTAs assist the PTs in providing the treatments to help the patients achieve their goals. These treatments may include exercise instruction and appropriate progression, use of physical and electrical modalities, functional training/retraining, such as transfers, walking, and balance improvement, and data collection such as vital signs pressure to ensure proper response to exercise and strength and range of motion measures to show impact of treatment.

Who are the patients with whom a PTA works?
Patients can range in age from neonates to frail, ill elders on hospice and anyone in between or anyone with a medical problem or health-related condition that limits one’s ability to perform necessary daily activities, whether as simple as combing one’s hair or as complex as on the job duties.

Where does a PTA work?
PTAs work in variety of settings to include hospitals, inpatient rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes, home health agencies, outpatient clinics, school districts, industrial/occupational centers, sports training and fitness facilities, and private practice.

What skills does a PTA require?
Besides a strong background in anatomy, physiology, and biomechanics, a PTA needs to have a desire to work closely with other people, a caring personality, strong communication and problem solving skills, and an ability to understand patients on all levels, including physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cultural. PTAs also need a moderate degree of physical strength as they may need to lift heavy patients, stand for long periods of time, squat, kneel, and reach in order to accomplish patient treatments.

What are the educational and licensure requirements for a PTA?
In order to work as a PTA, a student must graduate with an associate degree from an accredited PTA program at a technical or community college, college, or university. There are currently over 350 PTA programs across the country. There are separate educational programs and requirements for those interested in becoming physical therapists.

Most programs are 6-7 years in length and culminate in a clinical doctorate degree. Graduating from an accredited PTA program is not a pre-requisite to becoming a PT, nor will the technical credits transfer to a PT program. Forty-eight states, including Missouri, and the District of Columbia require PTAs to be licensed, registered, or certified. States requiring licensure stipulate specific educational and examination criteria. The Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy administers the standardized test that PTAs need to pass in order to be licensed and practice as PTAs. In order to maintain licensure, PTAs need to accumulate a state mandated number of continuing education hours and pay a state mandated fee every two years.

What is the career outlook for PTAs?
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment is expected to grow by 35% nationally from 2020 to 2030, which is faster than the average for all occupations. This is due to replacing workers who retire or transfer to different occupations as well as the growing aging population as the Baby Boomer generation has moved into the age group of those over 65.

What is the salary range for PTAs?
According to the American Physical Therapy Association and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual wages of a PTA was $59,770 in May 2020, with a range from $56,730-$67,120. Salaries depend on the setting in which the PTA works as well as number of years of experience. Settings employing the largest numbers of PTAs in May 2020 are hospitals and private practice/outpatient physical therapy clinics.

References:
https://www.apta.org/your-career/careers-in-physical-therapy/becoming-a-pta
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