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Advanced Practice in Sonography – Past, Present and Future

My name is Ted Whitten and I currently serve as the Chair for the SDMS Advanced Practice Committee (APC) and was recently appointed to serve on the SDMS Board of Directors as an At-Large Director. This article will be the first in a series of updates on the status of sonographer advanced practice. I have been following the discussion and development of a sonography mid-level provider for the last 15 years. I had determined early on that when this mid-level provider concept became a reality that I wanted to be one of the sonographers that officially worked as an advanced practice sonographer. In the beginning, there was tremendous excitement surrounding the sonographer mid-level provider concept, however, as is often the case with significant change, there were roadblocks that were encountered and frustrations experienced as we tried to move the concept from idea to reality. A lot of things have happened since that time, but that's how I began

my journey towards advanced practice in sonography.

In 2007 I realized my professional dream when I was offered, and accepted, a position at a large hospital as an "Advanced Ultrasound Practitioner". It is my goal, over the next couple of years, to provide updates to the membership at large about the status of sonographer advanced practice. I am sure there are other clinically practicing sonographers that are as eager for information and updates on the advanced practice issue as I had been. These updates will be provided periodically and I encourage any SDMS member to contact me



Ted Whitten, BA, RDMS, RVT

In this issue

cover story: Advanced Practice in Sonography - Past, Present, and Future • **4** SDMS Product Spotlight: Winter Special! • **5** Presidential Commitment: Passage of the CARE Bill • **6** Election 2012 - Call for Nominations • **7** Now Available! SDMS Commemorative Poster • **8** SDMS Fellow Spotlight • **10** Upcoming SDMS Webinars • **11** Sonographers Around the Globe • Congratulations to October's \$100 VISA Gift Card Winner! • **12** SDMS Welcomes New Members

if they have any questions related to these advanced practice updates.

In order to fully understand where we are today, it is helpful to understand the history of the work of the SDMS regarding advanced practice.

The Early Days

In 1996, a task force was commissioned by the Board of Directors of the Society of Diagnostic Medical Sonography (SDMS) and charged with determining the feasibility of creating a sonographer mid-level provider. The working title for this concept was the Ultrasound Practitioner (UP)¹. In 1998, the Ultrasound Practitioner Commission (UPC) was formed to investigate the concept of advanced practice in sonography and make formal recommendations to the SDMS leadership. In July 1999, the UP model was published in the *Journal of Diagnostic Medical Sonography (JDMS)* and the concept started to take shape and become more defined. In May 2001, the UP proposed curriculum was published in the *JDMS*. During the years 2002-2005, the SDMS sponsored the UP Committee, which focused on promoting adoption of graduate-level sonographer advanced practice degree programs. Despite repeated efforts with a multitude of universities and colleges, this effort was not successful. Academic deans raised the issue of establishing a graduate-level degree for a profession that has no educational degree standards for entry-level practice.

In 2006, the SDMS hosted a National Consensus Conference on Sonographer Advanced Practice. During the conference, physician specialty groups expressed concern about the title "Practitioner" and the Clinical Sonography Specialist (CSS) concept emerged from the consensus conference as the working title for the sonographer mid-level provider. Soon afterward, the SDMS and the ARDMS conducted a "Needs and Interest" survey for sonographers interested in advanced practice. The SDMS then conducted a "Needs and Interest" survey of various physician stakeholder groups whose results could best be described as equivocal in nature.

In 2009, the SDMS renamed the committee: the Advanced Practice Committee (APC). From 2007-2009 the SDMS promoted the CSS concept and encountered some resistance from physician stakeholder groups including titling concerns, reimbursement issues for allied health mid-level

providers, and preference for a master's level degree entry requirement. In 2010, the SDMS Board voted to move the APC into a monitoring and tracking mode of operation for the coming year. During that timeframe, Michael Hartman and I (the Co-Chairs of the APC) along with other SDMS leaders set up teleconferences with other medical imaging modalities that are promoting a mid-level provider model. These included the Advanced Cardiovascular Sonographer (ACS), which was endorsed by the American Society of Echocardiography (ASE), the Radiologist Assistant (RA), which was endorsed by the American College of Radiology (ACR), and the Nuclear Medicine Advanced Associate (NMAA), which was endorsed by the Society of Nuclear Medicine (SNM). The APC Co-Chairs made a presentation on their findings to the SDMS Board at the 2011 Spring Board Meeting and the SDMS Board voted to reactivate the APC.

Where We Stand Today

While there is currently no official designation, title, or certification examination associated with sonographer advanced practice, we do believe that some sonographers are functioning in a manner consistent with the concept of a sonographer mid-level provider. It is important that we know and understand the extent to which some sonographers have already moved into an advanced practice role, and the responsibilities and clinical activities that they have assumed in making this transition. To provide information to aid in future work, the SDMS APC has developed an "Advanced Practice Sonography Survey." This survey will be targeted, in part, at those sonographers who are officially employed as mid-level providers. I believe that the survey results will help the SDMS formulate a more current model for sonography advanced practice. The ARDMS has expressed interest in participating in this survey process which should help to insure that survey population numbers will be sufficient to achieve statistical reliability and validity. I believe that it is also important to note that the SDMS has become re-engaged in the concept of Sonographer Advanced Practice.

The Sonographer Advanced Practice Model

For those of us who are officially employed as mid-level providers, it is important to understand that we work under the authority of a supervising physician. The physician for whom I work has delegated the clinical responsibilities that constitute my job as an

Advanced Ultrasound Practitioner. Since there is no independent licensure of sonographers in my state and therefore no official scope of practice, I perform my duties only under the authority that is delegated to me by the supervising physician. Although I know several other sonographers that are employed as mid-level providers, we do not know how many are in existence today in the United States; acquiring this information is, in part, the objective of conducting our survey. Although these mid-level providers are known by different names, we believe they have many similarities in the function and duties that they perform. Once we have the results of the advance practice survey, we will have a better understanding of the typical duties and responsibilities. In order to help you more fully understand what sonographer advanced practice really is, I would like to provide you with a personal story of a sonographer that is officially employed as a sonography mid-level provider. Today, I would like to highlight one of my colleagues, Michael Clements BS, RDMS, RVT.



Michael Clements BS, RDMS, RVT

As a sonographer for 24 years at The University of Alabama at Birmingham Health System in Birmingham, Alabama, I feel very fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to experience professional growth in a field that I love by practicing as a sonographer radiologist

assistant (SRA). Since 2002 I have worked directly with the radiologists by assisting them in their efforts to increase their efficiencies. My primary responsibility is to review completed exams with the sonographer and to "scribe" a preliminary report that I then review with the radiologist and edit to their satisfaction. The report is then electronically signed and made available to the referring team. UAB Health System in Birmingham, Alabama is a large university hospital where we perform an average of 115 sonograms a day at our radiology inpatient and outpatient facilities. My colleague and I directly review and "scribe" the vast majority of sonogram reports done

during normal business hours. In addition to our "scribing" of reports, we also assist in the training of sonographers and radiology residents. We also play an active role in maintaining adherence to ACR and departmental protocols.

The SRA position has been very successful at our facility due to the support of all involved. We are very fortunate that we have radiologists with a high level of expertise in the practice of sonography. In fact, we have five body-imaging radiologists who are fellows with the Society of Radiologists in Ultrasound. Our sonographers have also been supportive. They appreciate having one of their own to review cases and to assist them when they have a difficult case; this happens routinely at our institution. Finally, our facility administration appreciates the fact that the SRA's have allowed the radiologist to become more efficient, thus improving the bottom line.

Up to this point, we have seen a picture of where we have been and where we stand today. The next obvious question is "Where do we go from here?"

Where do we go from here?

The SDMS APC will be evaluating the component options that will go into our vision of what an advanced practice; mid-level sonography provider might look like. We will be evaluating:

1. Educational standards, curriculum, and degree standards
 - a. The APC will be reviewing the UP curriculum that was proposed back in 2001 considering whether any additions or modifications may need to be made.
2. Minimum clinical experience that we believe should be required before being recognized as an advanced practice sonographer, and
3. Promoting the development of a national advanced practice certification exam
 - a. The SDMS and the APC will work with other ultrasound professional associations and the national sonography credentialing bodies to encourage interest in developing a national advanced practice sonography certification exam.

I currently serve on the Sonographer Relations Committee of the Society of Radiologists in Ultrasound (SRU) and the SRU is also interested in the topic of advanced practice in sonography and has expressed interest in working collaboratively with the SDMS to promote the model. As we look forward, the future holds encouragement for bringing the concept of sonographer advanced practice to fruition. I am

optimistic that we will be successful due to the work of those who have gone before us and the work of those who are currently committed to making sonographer advanced practice designation reality.

I welcome your comments and/or thoughts: I can be contacted via email at: twhitten@sdms.org

Ted Whitten BA, RDMS, RVT

SDMS Product Spotlight - Winter Special!

Keep warm this winter with these popular SDMS items. **Plus, SAVE \$10 this November when you place your order in the SDMS Online Store!** Just go to www.sdms.org/store and enter promotion code "**NW2011**" to save \$10 off of any order totaling \$60 or more.



Full Zip Hoodie

Item #: 4507

Price:

\$29 SDMS members /
\$39 non-members

You'll stay warm, toasty, and fashionable in this full-zip navy hooded sweatshirt. The SDMS logo is screen printed in white on the left chest area.



"Image is Everything" Tee (Long-Sleeved)

Item #: 4535 (white) or 4536 (black)

Price: \$18 SDMS members / \$25 non-members

100% cotton, long-sleeved t-shirt. Available in white or black with the *Image is Everything* logo silk-screened on the left chest.

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