

Guide to Clinical and Technical Skill Differentiation

The following guide provides additional clarification of the differences between clinical skills and technical skills. The key difference is that clinical skills include judgment, patient interactions/examinations, and their integration with the medical knowledge needed to make patient care decisions. Whereas technical skills are the execution of specific procedures. PAs need to be strong at both. Strong clinical skills without equal technical skills lead to a PA who is a good thinker with limited execution. The opposite, strong technical skills with limited clinical skills, leads to a task-doer with unsafe decision-making. The key is having both types of skills, as appropriate to the medical discipline.

The lists of examples are provided to guide programs in developing learning outcomes and competencies, and they are not all-inclusive lists.

Clinical Skills – The ARC-PA Standards glossary defines this term as: “Clinical skills are skills used to make patient care decisions. Examples include, but are not limited to, history taking, performing physical exam, patient counseling, diagnostic reasoning, diagnostic studies interpretation, effective communication, teamwork, and professionalism.”

Additional examples include, but are not limited to:

- Physical examination of each organ system (including donning and doffing PPE using Standard Precautions in order to perform such exams), such as vital signs, measuring pulse oximetry, measuring fundal height, fundoscopic exam, pelvic exam, hernia exam, sensory examinations such as using a monofilament, rectal exam, anoscopy, otoscopic examination, diabetic foot exam
- Documenting the physical exam, recording growth on a growth chart, fall risk assessments (fall risk, mental health, abuse/neglect, ADLs), obtaining and documenting informed consent, documenting in the EMR
- Interpreting diagnostic studies such as interpreting a(n): EKG, urinalysis, X-rays, PFTs, CT, MRI, ultrasound

Technical Skills - The ARC-PA Standards glossary defines this term as: “Technical skills are procedural skills. Examples include, but are not limited to, performing diagnostic studies, intravenous line insertion, surgical scrubbing, cast application, and suturing.”

Additional examples include, but are not limited to:

- Performing diagnostic tests such as POCUS, EKG (placing the leads, patient positioning, operating the machine, etc.), urine dipstick (dipping the urine, reading

and recording the results (interpretation of the results is a clinical skill)), spirometry, fingerstick blood glucose, performing ankle-brachial index (ABI), dermatoscopy, tilt table test, Dix-Hallpike maneuver

- Performing procedures such as cryotherapy/cryosurgery/cryoablation, IM/IV/SQ injections, venous blood draws, arterial blood draws, cerumen disimpaction, intubation, NG tube placement, lumbar puncture, splinting, casting, foreign body removal, corneal staining with fluorescein, I&D, fine needle aspiration (FNA), paracentesis, joint aspiration, joint injection, bursa aspiration, placement of nasal packing, thoracentesis, nebulizer breathing treatment, application and set up of a continuous glucose monitoring system, application and set up of an insulin pump, reprogramming of a programmable ventriculoperitoneal shunt, ring removal from a swollen digit, subungual hematoma drainage
- Insertion of catheters – peripheral IV, Foley, arterial, central venous
- Collecting specimens such as pap smear, wet mount, blood cultures, wound cultures, stool sample (guaiac), nasal swab, throat swab, CSF collection, joint fluid aspiration, skin biopsy
- Preparation for procedures such as surgical scrubbing, sterile self-gowning and self-gloving, prepping and draping a sterile site, local and regional anesthesia
- Intraoperative skills such as first-assist in surgery, navigation using a scope (“scope-driving”), vessel ligation
- Wound closure with sutures, with staples, with wound adhesive (Dermabond); suture removal; staple removal; complex wound care and dressing changes; application of wound vac