
# Pre-Physician Assistant Internship Program

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# Lessons in Compassion and Clinical Judgment from My Pre-PA at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital

I came to Mombasa, Kenya, with a curiosity about global healthcare. What I left with was far more than observation, I left with a deeper understanding of resilience, compassion, and the creativity required of healthcare providers in resource-limited settings. My two weeks at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital through International Medical Aid shaped not only my perspective on medicine, but also the kind of provider I aspire to become. In July 2025, I rotated through several departments, including pediatrics, emergency medicine, and labor and delivery. Each placement offered unique challenges and lessons, from working with critically ill children in the High Dependency Unit, to observing trauma and acute cases in the emergency department, to witnessing the intensity of overnight deliveries. These experiences reshaped the way I view patient care, strengthened my commitment to becoming a physician assistant, and reinforced my desire to pursue a career rooted in adaptability and compassion.

The resource-limited setting of a Kenyan referral hospital highlighted the importance of adaptability, clinical judgment, and teamwork in medicine. It also deepened my appreciation for cultural competence and reinforced my desire to pursue a career that bridges patient care with compassion, equity, and access. In this essay, I will reflect on the lessons I gained from my internship, describe how these lessons have shaped my personal and professional goals, and explain how I plan to apply this newfound knowledge to my future career in healthcare.

## Lessons Learned from Pediatrics

My first week at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital was spent in the pediatric department, which included the High Dependency Unit (HDU), the inpatient ward, and the outpatient clinic. Each area exposed me to different aspects of pediatric medicine and highlighted the challenges of providing care in a resource-limited setting.

In the HDU, I saw children critically ill with conditions such as malaria, pneumonia, and severe dehydration. With limited monitoring equipment, providers relied heavily on careful physical exams and clinical judgment. Watching physicians and nurses act with such precision reminded me that medicine depends as much on knowledge and presence as it does on technology. I also noticed how central families were to care, mothers and caregivers often stayed at the bedside, feeding and comforting their children. It underscored for me that treating a child means supporting the entire family.

The inpatient ward was crowded but full of resilience. Children admitted for longer-term care still found ways to laugh, play, and smile, even while battling illness (World Health Organization, 2023). This reminded me that pediatrics requires not only medical skill but also creativity, optimism, and patience. The outpatient clinic, by contrast, emphasized communication and trust. I shadowed physicians and medical students as they diagnosed fevers and infections, counseled parents, and provided follow-up care. One memorable encounter was a mother worried about her child, Ava, persistent cough. The physician took time not only to examine the child but to reassure her and explain how to monitor symptoms. That interaction showed me how powerful reassurance and education can be.

My week in pediatrics taught me that medicine is not only about addressing immediate illness but about building trust, supporting families, and adapting to circumstances. The lack of abundant resources in Mombasa revealed how powerful strong clinical reasoning, communication, and compassion can be. As an aspiring PA, I want to carry these lessons forward by becoming a provider who combines medical expertise with cultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence. I want to embody these same qualities, especially when working with vulnerable populations In the United States, I may not always encounter the same level of resource scarcity, but disparities still exist. My time in pediatrics at Coast General showed me that effective providers don't just treat patients; they meet them where they are, partner with their families, and offer care that is both competent and compassionate.

## Lessons From the Emergency Department

During the second week of my internship, I rotated through the emergency department, including both adult and pediatric units. The emergency department was fast-paced, unpredictable, and often chaotic, a contrast to the structured environment of the outpatient clinic. I witnessed cases ranging from acute infections to trauma. One case that stayed with me was a toddler with severe malaria, whose rapid deterioration required immediate intervention. Observing how the team coordinated care under pressure highlighted the importance of quick decision-making and clear communication. Another specific case involved a man who was involved in a street traffic accident who had sustained a significant injury to his face, which included a compound fracture and mandible dislocation. The attending physician quickly assessed the situation, coordinated imaging, and explained the care plan to the anxious patient. Observing this interaction, I realized how crucial clear communication is, not just with the patient but also with the family. Every word mattered in building trust and helping the family feel involved in care decisions, that made me feel content on how everything was handled.

The adult ED presented different challenges. Patients often arrived with complex conditions, and resources were limited compared to what I have seen in U.S. hospitals. I saw providers rely on careful observation, prioritization, and creative problem-solving to stabilize patients efficiently. Overcrowding was common, and staff had to make rapid decisions about who required immediate intervention versus who could wait. I had the opportunity to observe the triage process firsthand, watching nurses and physicians quickly assess vital signs, symptoms, and overall condition to determine urgency. This experience emphasized the importance of staying calm under pressure, making swift decisions, and trusting one's clinical judgment—skills I hope to carry forward as a future physician assistant.

Beyond clinical skills, the ED also highlighted the human side of medicine. Many patients were in distress not only from illness or injury but also from fear, uncertainty, or socioeconomic stressors. I observed how providers offered reassurance, listened attentively, and made patients feel heard even in brief interactions. This reinforced a lesson I had learned in pediatrics: effective care is not just about diagnosis and treatment, but about empathy, communication, and emotional support. Experiencing this firsthand strengthened my desire to pursue a career where I can provide competent and compassionate care, especially in moments when patients are most vulnerable.

Overall, my time in the Emergency Department deepened my understanding of high-pressure medical environments and highlighted the critical importance of teamwork, adaptability, and patient-centered care. These experiences will guide me as a future PA, teaching me how to respond effectively in urgent situations while maintaining empathy and connection with patients and their families.

## Lessons From Labor and Delivery

During my overnight shift in the Labor and Delivery ward, I witnessed the intensity, urgency, and profound humanity of bringing new life into the world. Even though my time there was brief, I observed the critical teamwork between medical officers, nurses, and midwives, and how every decision carried weight for both mother and child. I was shocked to learn that epidurals were generally not offered unless the mother was undergoing a C-section, and I felt for the women laboring without this form of pain relief. Seeing their strength and resilience firsthand was both humbling and inspiring.

I also had the opportunity to view a C-section, which was an eye-opening experience. Observing the surgical team's coordination and focus, as well as the immediate transition of the newborn to care, highlighted the precision and teamwork required in critical situations. This experience reinforced lessons I had already begun to understand in pediatrics and the emergency department: medicine is not just about technical skill, but also about empathy, communication, and presence. Providers balanced clinical urgency with compassion, comforting patients and offering reassurance even in high-stress

moments. Being in the ward overnight gave me a deep appreciation for the emotional and human side of healthcare and reminded me that being a provider is as much about supporting people through life's most vulnerable moments as it is about treating disease. These lessons strengthened my aspiration to become a physician assistant who can deliver competent care while also connecting with patients on a human level.

## HIV/AIDS Awareness

Mombasa County has a higher HIV prevalence than the national average, with a rate of 5.6% compared to Kenya's national average of 4.9% (Kenyanews.go.ke, 2024). According to more recent data, the prevalence of HIV in Kenya was 3.03% in 2025, with approximately 1.33 million people living with HIV. Mombasa County specifically has a prevalence rate of 6.69% among women, compared to the national female prevalence of 4.08% (Stats Kenya, 2024). These statistics became profoundly real during my time at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital. I encountered numerous patients, both adults and children, whose lives were directly affected by HIV. The emotional weight of these encounters was palpable, especially when discussing treatment plans and the challenges of medication adherence. A study from the Kenyan coast found a high prevalence of HIV virological non-suppression (VNS) at 32.0% among young people living with HIV aged 18–24, with factors such as being from a largely rural setting, being underweight, and low self-reported ART adherence significantly associated with higher odds of VNS (Nyongesa et al., 2022).

One particularly memorable interaction involved a mother in the pediatric ward, deeply concerned about her child's health. The physician took extra time to explain the child's condition, the importance of antiretroviral therapy, and the need for consistent follow-up care. Witnessing this compassionate communication underscored the significance of not only medical treatment but also emotional support and education in managing chronic conditions like HIV. These experiences have profoundly influenced my understanding of healthcare. They highlighted the importance of addressing both the physical and emotional aspects of patient care, especially in regions with high HIV prevalence (World Health Organization, 2023). As an aspiring physician assistant, I am committed to providing holistic care that encompasses medical treatment, patient education, and emotional support, ensuring that patients feel heard and understood managing their health.

## Conclusion

My two weeks in Mombasa, Kenya, at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital were transformative, offering lessons that extended far beyond clinical knowledge. From the pediatric wards,

I learned the power of observation, clinical reasoning, and compassion, witnessing firsthand how families are integral to a child's care and how resilience can thrive even in challenging circumstances. The Emergency Department taught me adaptability, rapid decision-making, and the importance of clear communication in high-pressure situations, reinforcing that patient-centered care extends beyond diagnosis to include empathy and reassurance. My overnight shift in Labor and Delivery was a deeply humanizing experience, revealing the courage of women giving birth without access to epidurals, and the teamwork required in a C-section.

These experiences were further framed by the reality of living in a region with high HIV prevalence. Encountering patients affected by HIV deepened my appreciation for the intersection of medical care, patient education, and emotional support. I realized that effective healthcare requires not only knowledge and skill but also cultural sensitivity and the ability to support patients through their most vulnerable moments.

Together, these rotations solidified my desire to become a physician assistant who can provide competent, compassionate care in a variety of settings. I am inspired to carry forward the lessons I learned in Mombasa: the importance of empathy, communication, adaptability, and partnership with patients and families. This internship has not only reinforced my commitment to healthcare but has also shaped my vision for the kind of PA I aspire to be.

# REFERENCES


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