Core Competencies to Expect from Your Medical Assistants

Medical practices increasingly rely on multi-skilled medical assistants to operate at the top of their scope of practice to help providers manage a host of challenges related to:

- Reducing provider burnout
- Garnering appropriate reimbursements
- Meeting or exceeding high-quality standards of care

If you’re like most healthcare providers pressured to do more with fewer resources, you may be asking yourself whether your medical assistants contribute to your practice in a way that optimizes their professional competencies.

Read on to find out what tasks your medical assistants can perform to allow advanced care providers to focus on direct patient care.
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THE SITUATION
With the advent of electronic medical records and the added complexity of regulations that impact reimbursements, there is increased demand in the time, effort and knowledge required in non-clinical business issues like reimbursement, billing, coding and staff management. According to an American Hospital Association survey, 20% of physicians' time is spent on non-clinical paperwork.¹

On the clinical side, a nursing shortage has contributed to a decline in the number of nurses employed in practices. Additionally, rising nursing compensations are forcing practices to re-evaluate their staffing mix in order to contain costs while maintaining quality. Nursing compensation rose almost 20% from 2015 to 2018, according to a Medical Group Management Association study.²

THE SOLUTION
To fill the gap, medical assistants are taking on some duties previously performed by nurses and have other expanded duties overseen by providers. A medical assistant also creates value in the practice by performing administrative functions, making the operation flow effectively. This allows a practice to better utilize physician time in order to meet patient needs. "We are able to see more patients in a day because physicians and medical assistants together have crafted a protocol that frees up doctors' time to focus singularly on patients," says Mary Kachelski, RN, BSN, nursing manager for Olmstead Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota.

In successful practices, such as Fayetteville Gastroenterology Associates of Fayetteville, North Carolina, medical assistants rotate through administrative and clinical roles, which results in a cross-trained team that does not become complacent in their duties. Because medical assistants cover a range of responsibilities, they can be your most flexible practice resource.

For optimal assignment of duties to medical assistants, they should be working at the top of their scope of practice. While every practice is responsible for ensuring that all care providers operate within their scope of practice, you can generally expect a qualified medical assistant to cover a wide range of skilled tasks.

The last 10-year period has seen a 20.1% increase in support staff per full-time employee physician.³

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¹ 2016 Survey of America’s Physicians: Practice Patterns & Perspectives, The Physicians Foundation, September 2016. American Hospital Association website, 2018 Environmental Scan
³ Study by Medical Group Management Association (MGMA)
# Maximize Your Medical Assistants

A checklist of 20 core competencies that medical assistants should be able to cover*

## ADMINISTRATIVE

- **Communication skills** for receiving incoming calls and making outgoing calls to meet patient needs.

- **Knowledge of appointment scheduling protocols** for acute and/or urgent visits and of the technology for scheduling patient visits. This includes understanding that the priority is the check-in, rooming and discharge of patients with the goal of keeping providers on schedule.

- **Capability to review appropriateness** of the daily patient schedule and take corrective action as necessary (e.g., rescheduling the patient with instructions to obtain labs if the appointment is for review of labs but no lab results are available). Fill appointment cancellation spots.

- **Patient registration in the practice management system** including capturing insurance information.

- **Understanding insurance protocols and regulations** and helping patients navigate the healthcare system to obtain authorizations and referrals (verifying the patient is eligible for the service under their insurance plan) per physician orders.

- **Fluency in the technology and administration of the practice.** This includes billing/coding; record-keeping; telephone and voicemail system; auto-attendant and call transfer; practice management and EHR; insurance eligibility; e-fax; scanning documents into appropriate systems and files; and ancillary systems for order and result processing at affiliated diagnostic and hospital systems.

## CLINICAL

- **Chart prep prior to patient appointment,** such as most recent labs or radiology studies and referral appointment documentation.

- **Preparing exam rooms daily** and turning over exam rooms for each patient visit.

- **Performing a patient history intake,** including verification or reconciliation of medications, taking vitals and recording the reason for visit during the rooming process for a physical exam or procedure.

- **Performing electrocardiograms.**

- **Administration of injections per physician orders.**

- **Setting up for sterile procedures,** preparing gloves, instruments, sutures and sterile gauze.

- **Assisting with minor procedures in office such as suture removal.**

- **Changing dressings.**

- **Performing phlebotomy services as ordered by the physician.**

- **Performing certain laboratory tests.**

- **Disposing of contaminated supplies.**

- **Entering orders into the computer system as directed by the physician.**

- **Educating patients regarding discharge instructions,** medication dosing protocols and treatment plans, as well as providing coaching and following through with orders.

- **Scheduling follow-up appointments** for patients as a component of patient visit discharge.

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*Scope of practice laws may vary by state. Assumes medical assistant supervision by licensed provider.*
THE VALUE OF CERTIFICATION
One tried-and-true way that medical practices ascertain that medical assistants meet basic competencies is to require a professional credential of certification.

Certification of a medical assistant through an independent third-party agency like a nonprofit association demonstrates that your medical assistant has been trained and tested against an industry standard on all baseline competencies. Some practices ensure that every one of their medical assistants are certified to enhance operational efficiency, as you can assign tasks to any medical assistant staff member and expect the same consistency and high quality.

In addition, certification:
- Ensures competencies remain current through certification maintenance requirements.
- May result in lower staff turnover because certified individuals show more commitment to their profession, which means fewer hiring and training headaches and higher-quality patient care.
- Can help alleviate provider burnout by allowing advanced care providers to focus on direct patient care. This in turn translates to happier patients and higher patient satisfaction scores.

While a certification credential can be a stepping stone to an advanced credential, many medical assistants who are certified as Registered Medical Assistants (RMAs) remain in the position for years and take on a variety of additional roles. For example, in a recent AMT member survey, RMAs reported the following job titles:
- Health educator
- MA peer-trainer
- Provider scribe
- Surgical scheduler
- Clinical supervisor

ELEVATE YOUR STAFF
Are you ready to certify your staff? AMT can help.

By partnering with AMT, you will receive dedicated account service from our experienced team of experts, who will guide you through the process of getting your team certified.

LEARN HOW AMT CAN SUPPORT YOUR ORGANIZATION.
Call 847-823-5169, ext. 390, (8:00 am – 3:30 pm CST) or visit americanmedtech.org for more information.

ABOUT AMT
As the professional association for allied health, AMT is a lifelong career partner that provides continuing education, networking and leadership development. Today, AMT has more than 85,000 actively certified allied health professionals in nine distinct specialties, each of whom are full members of our nonprofit membership society.

“Medical assistants who have passed the AMT RMA certification exam are hired because we can be assured that they have adequate training and knowledge.”
— Sue Hahn, B.Ed., Supervisor, Central Staffing, ProMedica Physicians Group, Toledo, Ohio

“I have recommended AMT to other practices.”
— Sandy Johnson, Office Manager, Sylvan Lakes Family Physicians, Sylvania, Ohio