

Scope of Practice

MEDICAL ASSISTANTS perform clinical or technical functions in a physician's office. They interact with patients and assist nurses and doctors. Some states require that medical assistants be licensed, and education requirements vary by area. Medical assistants certified by the American Association of Medical Assistants earn higher pay and can perform a wider range of activities than uncertified medical assistants.



Objectives:



1. Describe factors that influence the medical assistant's scope of practice.
2. Explain duties and responsibilities of the medical assistant.
3. Identify tasks outside of the medical assistant's scope of practice.

Key Terms:



AAMA
AMT

CLIA
HIPAA

OSHA
scope of practice

The Medical Assistant's Scope of Practice

The **scope of practice** (of a medical assistant) is the legal limits and boundaries within which you can practice your profession. The scope of practice defines the procedures, actions, and duties a medical assistant may perform.

WHAT DETERMINES SCOPE OF PRACTICE?

In many places, state laws and statutes determine the medical assistant's limitations. Medical boards and nursing practice acts establish medical assistant duties. However, if you live in an area without legal regulations, the policies, procedures, and regulations can be established by



ON THE JOB...

CAREER CONNECTION: What Is a Certified Medical Assistant?

The American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) offers medical assistants the opportunity to become certified. A certified medical assistant (CMA) has better professional credentials and more job security. In addition, a CMA earns higher pay. Many physicians prefer hiring CMAs because of the training required to become certified.

The National Board of Medical Examiners, which oversees many national exams for physicians, serves as test consultant for the CMA exam. As a result, the exam is respected for its reliability, validity, and security.

To become a CMA, you must enroll in an accredited medical assisting program. Online you will be able to learn about tuition costs and financial aid options, academic requirements, program length (often two years), and specific topics of study. Training can be in human anatomy, physiology, and pathology; medical terminology; keyboarding and computer applications; recordkeeping; coding and insurance processing; laboratory techniques; pharmacology; medication administration; first aid; office practices; patient relations; and medical law and ethics.

In addition to your studies, part of the program is to work in a healthcare facility under supervision and without pay for a specified period of time. After completing all requirements, you will apply to take the certification exam. Once certified, you will have earned the industry's highest standard in the medical assistant profession and will have the right to use this credential on job applications.

individual healthcare facilities. In addition, job functions can be determined by supervising physicians and nurses. Also, the American Association of Medical Assistants (**AAMA**) is a professional organization that established the Medical Assistant Code of Ethics and that offers certification for medical assistants. The American Medical Technologists (**AMT**) also offers certification programs.

Variance in Laws

Many states in the United States do not have specific laws that regulate the scope of practice or the roles and responsibilities of the medical assistant. In other states, the State Medical Board (or Medical Board of Examiners) has established rules and statutes that govern how physicians and other licensed healthcare professionals utilize and supervise medical assistants within their practices. Some state Boards of Nursing (or Nurse Practice Acts) have established regulations regarding how nurses employ medical assistants and delegate responsibilities. These acts tend to regulate and protect the nurse's title as distinct from that of a medical assistant.

Illinois Regulations

- ◆ Section 50-15(a) of the 2007 revision of the Illinois Practice Act stipulates that only licensed nurses can practice nursing or indicate in any way that they are nurses. Therefore, by law, medical assistants cannot refer to themselves as nurses.

- ◆ Section 50-20(a) of the same law stipulates that anyone illegally practicing nursing can be fined up to \$10,000 for each offense.
- ◆ Section 50-75(c) of the revised Illinois Nurse Practice Act stipulates that nurses cannot delegate medical assistants any tasks or duties that require the specialized knowledge and skill of nurses. For instance, medical assistants cannot give medications at a nurse's direction.
- ◆ The Illinois Medical Practice Act and the Physician Delegation of Authority Act of the Illinois Administrative Code give physicians the authority to delegate tasks and duties "to a licensed practical nurse, a registered professional nurse, or other personnel including, but not limited to, certified nursing assistants or medical assistants." This act seems to give the assignment of duties to physicians, as long as everyone is correctly identified by their proper job title.

Regulations in All States

By law, in every state, the supervising physician (or other licensed healthcare professional) must be present in the facility whenever a medical assistant provides any kind of direct patient care. This is required regardless of the medical assistant's training or years of experience.

OSHA, HIPAA, AND CLIA REGULATIONS

- ◆ **OSHA** is an abbreviation for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. OSHA establishes national guidelines and standards for the health and safety of employees. It is responsible for standards for the handling of biohazardous material and waste.



FIGURE 1. OSHA logo. (Courtesy, U.S. Department of Labor)

- ◆ **HIPAA** is an abbreviation for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. The HIPAA Privacy Rule established national standards to protect patient privacy, medical records, and other personal medical information. All medical personnel, including medical assistants, are required to follow HIPAA regulations.
- ◆ **CLIA** is an abbreviation for the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments. CLIA establishes quality standards for laboratory testing. Medical assistants must follow CLIA standards when collecting specimens and performing simple lab tests.

Medical Assistant's Duties and Responsibilities

Administrative medical assistants greet patients, handle office correspondence and billing, answer telephones, maintain filing records, inventory supplies, maintain equipment, and prepare exam rooms.

Technical medical assistants collect, prepare, and transfer specimens to labs; perform routine lab tests; prepare patients for procedures; assist the physician during exams; and engage in sanitation and infection control procedures. In states where it is permitted, under physician supervision, the technical medical assistant (TMA) will administer medication as well as perform phlebotomy services (draw blood) and electrocardiograms (EKGs).

Other responsibilities will be to clean, wrap, and sterilize instruments; set up a sterile field (a specified area free of microorganisms); check and record vital signs; and explain the physician's instruction to the patient. The TMA may respond to emergencies and apply topical numbing medication to a patient's skin.



FIGURE 2. Administrative medical assistants are responsible for many tasks, including preparing exam rooms.

Tasks Never Performed by a Medical Assistant

Doctor functions never performed by medical assistants include diagnosing and treating patients; and assessing, planning, and evaluating patient care and treatment. Only doctors will advise patients or engage in medical decision-making processes. You will never perform arterial punctures or invasive procedures, except phlebotomy and skin tests, where it is permitted by state law.

As an MA, you will not perform physical therapy or administer IV medications to patients. In addition, you will not independently analyze or interpret lab tests. Medical assistants do not administer anesthetic agents (except topical numbing medication, where permitted by law).

MAs do not refill or authorize prescriptions independently. They need the authorization of the supervising physician. Also, medical assistants do not perform clinical tasks that require a licensed professional in the given state. Medical assistants should never refer to themselves as nurses.

Summary:



Scope of practice defines the procedures, actions, and duties a medical assistant may perform. Your scope of practice is often regulated by the legal limit and boundaries set by state and federal laws. A physician must be in the office or clinic at all times when the medical assistant provides any kind of direct patient care.

Medical assistants can work in clinical or technical capacities. State and federal regulations specify what tasks an MA is qualified to perform. The American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) is a professional organization that established the Medical Assistant Code of Ethics and that offers certification for medical assistants.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Define scope of practice, and explain who determines the boundaries of the medical assistant's duties.
2. Why must a medical assistant never confuse his or her job title with that of a nurse?
3. How do the jobs of administrative and clinical medical assistants differ?
4. What are some tasks a medical assistant may never perform?
5. What can a medical assistant do to change his or her title and raise the pay scale?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Explore the certifying and educational opportunities offered by the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA). The process of gaining certification will teach you about specialty areas you might want to pursue and help you gain a higher pay scale.

Web Links:



Medical Assistant Training Programs

<http://www.lincolnedu.com/careers/health-sciences/medical-assisting>

Scope of Interest

http://www.medicalassistant.net/scope_of_practice.htm#.Tx2W1s26rzw

Medical Assistant Schools

<http://medicalassistantsite.com/scope-of-practice.html>