

Patient Advocacy

MANY PATIENTS take charge of their own health. They may research their doctors, diagnoses, and treatment options to ensure they are receiving the best possible care. In some cases, however, a patient may need extra help to meet his or her healthcare needs. In this unit, you will learn about patient advocacy and how medical assistants may play an important role in supporting patients.



Objective:



Describe patient advocacy and the medical assistant's role as advocate.

Key Terms:



- administrative tasks
- advocate
- HIPAA
- medical malpractice laws
- patient advocacy

Understanding Patient Advocacy

Health problems can be scary, especially if patients do not fully understand their condition or treatments. Likewise, insurance policies and coverage may be confusing, leaving patients unclear on their options. Sometimes it is necessary for another person to step in and help the patient achieve the best health outcome.

HEALTH CARE AND ADVOCACY

An **advocate** is an individual who works on behalf of another person or group. An advocate provides support and has that person's best interests in mind. Generally, an advocate works in the healthcare and legal fields, as well as for civil rights and the rights of children.

Patient advocacy is the act of supporting the rights and health of patients. A patient advocate works closely with patients to improve the quality of care. He or she strives to improve patient understanding, serves as a bridge between patients and doctors, and prevents medical errors.

GOVERNMENT GROUPS

Some governmental groups exist to aid patients and act as patient advocates. Examples are the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control, and the legal system.

Health and Human Services

The U.S. government includes many groups that advocate for patients. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) created the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (**HIPAA**), which is an act that protects the privacy of personal health information. HIPAA gives patients more control over their own health records and limits how that information may be disclosed.

Centers for Disease Control

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are other groups that fall under the Department of Health and Human Services. The CDC conducts research, provides information, and coordinates resources to protect the public's health. The FDA works to ensure the safety of foods and medications.

Legal System

The legal system includes protections for patients as well. **Medical malpractice laws** are rules that provide recourse for patients who did not receive proper medical care due to negligence or error.

ADVOCACY GROUPS

Advocacy groups work to inform public about health-related topics or lobby for tougher laws to protect patients. Examples of nonprofit health advocacy groups are the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the National Patient Safety Foundation, and the Alzheimer's Association.

Relatives

The patient's relatives are important advocates as well. Family members may need to be "eyes and ears" for patients. They can ask questions about care and help keep track of options,

appointments, medications, and doctors. Family members may have to make care decisions for some patients, such as children. Relatives may be responsible for making decisions regarding seriously ill or injured patients (e.g., those who are unconscious or in a coma) and mentally incompetent patients (e.g., elderly patients with dementia or mentally ill patients).

Medical Personnel

Medical personnel often must act as patient advocates. They are especially important advocates because they are directly responsible for patient care. These personnel include doctors, nurses, medical assistants, physician's assistants, and therapists. Medical personnel provide care, educate patients, and try to avoid decisions and mistakes that could harm patients.

MEDICAL ASSISTANTS

Medical assistants provide a link between doctors and patients to foster better communication. Some patients may be intimidated by doctors, especially if they feel rushed. They may forget to mention details or may downplay their symptoms.

You may obtain medical histories and background information from patients. Ask questions, especially if the patients are vague or confused, to ensure you are receiving full and accurate information. Encourage the patients to ask questions, and direct any concerns to the doctor or your supervisor.

Provide Information

Advocate for your patients by providing information. Explain the diagnosis, treatment options, procedures, follow-up care, and medications. Describe the benefits and risks of a treatment as well as the risks associated with declining treatment. Make sure patients understand their rights to protect their privacy, seek a second opinion, or refuse medical care. Answer questions when possible, but remember that your job does not include giving medical advice. Give the facts, and direct the patient to the doctor for advice.

Put patients in touch with other community resources when appropriate. For example, you may inform patients about clinics for follow-up care or help them schedule appointments for fur-

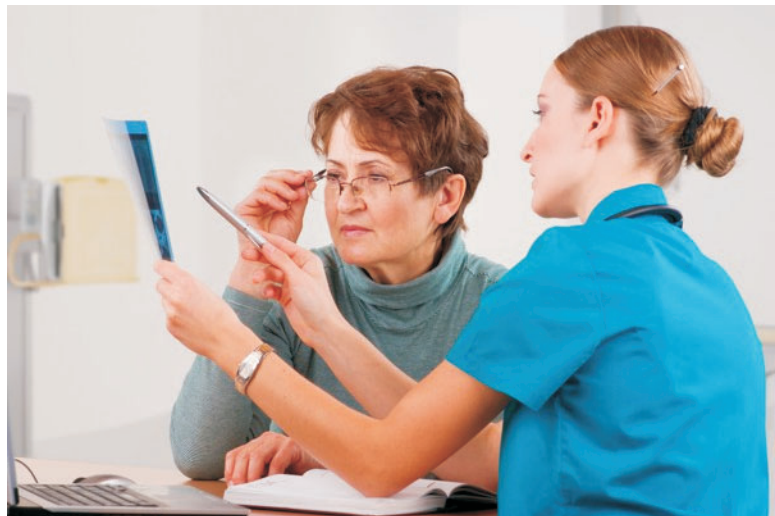


FIGURE 1. Medical assistants advocate for patients by explaining a diagnosis and treatment options.



FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: Professional Patient Advocates

Some medical professionals enjoy advocating for patients so much that they choose to make it the focus of their career. Patient advocacy is a growing career. Most advocates have a background in a medical field, such as medical assisting or nursing. They seek additional training and certification to work full time as a professional advocate.

Professional advocates do not perform any medical duties. Instead, they focus on securing the best care for their patients. They may search for the best doctors and facilities or seek experimental drug trials in which patients may participate. They also may provide support to patients with no family members nearby and handle the communication with insurance companies. In addition, advocates may coordinate the appointments, tests, and medications.

Visit the following sites to read more about becoming a patient advocate. Find out how being a professional advocate differs from advocating for patients as a medical assistant. Create a list of job requirements, including personal characteristics and educational requirements.

<http://patients.about.com/od/caringforotherpatients/ss/becomeadvocate.htm>

<http://www.patientadvocatetraining.com/>

<http://nursinglink.monster.com/benefits/articles/7881-make-a-difference-as-a-patient-advocate>

ther testing or rehabilitation. Some patients may need shuttles that provide transportation to appointments or help finding in-home caregivers.

Ensure the Best Possible Care

Your job as a medical assistant is to ensure the best possible care for your patients. You do not diagnose patients, but you may alert doctors or supervisors to potential problems, such as a change in symptoms or an emergency situation. You may recognize and call attention to potential errors, such as dangerous medication interactions, drug allergies, or an incorrect dosage of a drug. Your attention to detail protects patients from possible harm, but it also protects the doctor from a malpractice case. It is not your place to step in and fix an error on your own. You should always report the error to your supervisor.

Administrative Tasks

Medical assistants perform **administrative tasks**, which are office duties, including paperwork. Some administrative tasks may overwhelm patients. You may be asked to file insurance paperwork or call an insurance company to receive approval for a patient's treatment. As an advocate, you may go a step further to explain the insurance details to the patient. You also may alert him or her to charitable groups that may help patients with medical bills. In addition, you may be required to schedule appointments for patients. As an advocate, you may be able to convince a doctor or specialist to see a patient, despite the usual long wait for appointments.

Summary:



Patient advocacy is the act of supporting the rights and health of patients. A patient advocate strives to improve patient understanding, serves as a bridge between patients and doctors, and helps prevent medical errors. A variety of groups and people act as patient advocates. Some advocates work for government groups and others for nonprofit groups. Family members and medical personnel often serve as patient advocates. Medical assistants provide a link between doctors and patients to foster better communication. They gather patient information for the doctor and give patients information about a diagnosis, possible treatments, and procedures. Medical assistants may put patients in touch with community resources, watch for medical errors, and help with administrative tasks, as needed.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is patient advocacy?
2. What are some examples of patient advocates?
3. What is HIPAA?
4. What are some ways medical assistants can advocate for patients?
5. What administrative duties can be performed by medical assistants?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Interview a medical assistant to find out how he or she advocates for patients. Ask about the assistant's specific duties, especially those that relate to the communication process. Does the assistant take medical histories from patients? Does the assistant explain treatment options? Find out how the medical assistant decides when to take matters to a supervisor or doctor.

Web Links:



Advocacy Groups

<http://www.advoconnection.com/resources/NPlist.asp>

Patient Advocates

<http://www.delnor.com/patientadvocate>

Role of the Patient Advocate

<http://www.npsf.org/for-patients-consumers/tools-and-resources-for-patients-and-consumers/role-of-the-patient-advocate/>

Patient Advocate

<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/health-care/booming-new-profession-patient-advocate>