Banner Health, one of the largest nonprofit health systems in the nation and recognized for high-quality patient care—relies on a strong network of medical assistants to help ensure that its ambulatory care services are patient-centered.

SharaDawn Miller, RN Clinical Education Specialist at Banner Health Ambulatory, coordinates training, onboarding and continuing education for about 2,000 ambulatory care employees, including 850 medical assistants who are certified and about another 350 working toward certification. Banner Medical Group requires medical assistants to be certified by a nonprofit organization, such as American Medical Technologists (AMT). Certification is part of every Banner Medical Group’s medical assistant job description.

Recognizing that credentialed medical assistants offer a wide range of valuable skills, Banner Medical Group has created four specific career tracks for them, reflecting the flexibility of the medical assistant role. “We are becoming more expansive in how we use medical assistants to improve patient care quality,” says Miller. In addition to patient care, she explains how Banner has improved efficiency by training medical assistants to become experts in four practice areas.

**Practice Areas**

1. **Administrative and population health.** Medical assistants help manage the health and wellness of patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. They track individual patient care, for example, by reminding patients with diabetes when it is time for their podiatry or eye exams, and flagging important information for physicians treating patients. They review patient charts and wellness scorecards and help identify health care trends and gaps. Banner Health is an Accountable Care Organization (ACO), with a goal to keep patients healthy and out of the hospital. Therefore, when medical assistants assist with population health, they help Banner achieve its ACO goal.

2. **Direct patient care.** In a classic medical assistant role, medical assistants perform “rooming” duties: greeting patients, recording medical histories and checking vital signs before the physician enters the exam room. They also administer vaccinations, perform point-of-care tests, assist with procedures and help patients understand lab results.

3. **Front office.** Here, medical assistants use their health care training to begin providing care the moment patients arrive at the ambulatory clinic. Collaborating with other health care providers, front office medical assistants help patients with understanding information. Also, as the first contact with patients by phone or in person, these medical assistants can readily recognize symptoms and quickly connect patients with the appropriate health care providers.

4. **Patient insurance and finance.** In the patient financial representative role, medical assistants perform billing and insurance coding duties and assist patients with referrals. With their health care background, the medical assistants can help patients understand the insurance, billing and referral processes. “Ambulatory care is very fast-paced, so it is important to have certified medical assistants who are experts and can focus in each of these areas,” Miller said. Medical assistants at Banner Medical Group continually
Medical assistants also are encouraged to take ownership of projects, solve problems within their clinics and share information through Banner’s Shared Leadership program, Miller said. Medical assistants across the system meet virtually every quarter to share information and work together to foster good patient care and efficiency. Recently, a certified medical assistant volunteered to investigate issues that nearly everyone was experiencing with a particular piece of equipment. The medical assistant prepared an educational PowerPoint presentation about solutions, which is now available for CEU credit within Banner Health’s continuing education program.

“We are becoming more expansive in how we use medical assistants to improve patient care quality.”

SharaDawn Miller
RN Clinical Education Specialist

Because certification as a medical assistant is required, Banner Medical Group also offers a self-study program with extensive resources that medical assistants can use to prepare for certification. Created and managed by Deborah Lehker MSN, RN, CWON, MMOAS, the Clinical Professional Development Professional for ambulatory care, the certification preparation program has achieved a high certification pass rate. It also helps ensure that rapidly growing Banner Health will continue to attract and keep a high number of outstanding certified medical assistants.

Banner Health’s strong network of medical assistants also is enhanced by a comprehensive onboarding and standardization process. A four-week orientation process, which includes a Simulation Skills Assessment, ensures all medical assistants meet the same high skills standards and allows Banner to develop training programs tailored to individual medical assistant needs. Banner Health’s Annual Clinical Education day then ensures standards are maintained and offers training as needed to build on the initial orientation, provide continual reminders or updates for best practice and excellence in service, as well as helps to keep Banner’s practices with positive overall outcomes in patient care, Miller says.

The system was tested when a measles outbreak within Banner Health’s service area threatened to spread quickly. Banner Medical Group’s certified medical assistants, in partnership with providers, sprang into action. They spread communication quickly to the community, working 12 hours a day to vaccinate people against measles, Miller said. “Within a short period of time, they had connected with everyone in the area who wanted a measles vaccination.”

Medical Assistant Competencies

To standardize the role of medical assistant, Banner Health has defined competencies for core and advanced skills as well as specialty and occupational health skill sets. Below are the Banner Health designations for core skills and advanced skills.

Core skills for medical assisting

1. Measure and Record
   - Document on a growth chart
   - Electrocardiography
   - Head circumference
   - Height/Length
   - Weight
   - Patient screening using established protocols (vision and hearing)
   - Pulmonary function testing (spirometer)
   - Pulse oximetry
   - Vital signs: blood pressure, temperature, pulse, respirations

2. Medication Process
   - Administer PO, IM, SQ, inhaled medications
   - Calculate proper dosages of medication for administration
   - Identify classification of medications (e.g. anti-infective, cardiovascular) indications for use, desired

Medical Assistants Help Banner Achieve Its Accountable Care Organization Goals for Population Health

Banner Health reported strong increases in the number of patients receiving vaccinations or health screenings, thanks in part to the work of their medical assistants. For example, one Banner Health site reported these results for one quarter of 2016:

- Flu vaccine: Finished flu season at 98%, exceeding stretch target
- Pneumococcal vaccine: Vaccinations up 29.7%
- Colorectal cancer: Screenings up 3.7%
- Breast cancer: Screenings up 27.8%
- Diabetes follow-up: Reaching goals for numbers of patients with in-range blood sugar measures
effects, side effects, and adverse reactions
• Select proper site for administering parenteral medications (IM and SQ)
• Administer small volume nebulizer treatments

3. Procedure/Exam
• Assist provider with patient exam
• Perform dressing change
• Perform basic first aid procedures as they relate to the ambulatory setting (e.g., bleeding)
• Perform basic wound care
• Prepare a sterile field and perform within a sterile field.
• Dispose properly of bio-hazardous material:
  o Chemo spill cleanup (clinics that administer chemotherapy)
  o Regulated wastes
  o Sharps

4. Specimen Collection and Results Reporting
• Perform capillary puncture
• Follow results reporting process
• Obtain specimens/perform CLIA waved tests:
  o Chemistry
  o Hematology
  o Immunology
  o Microbiology
  o Urinalysis
• Perform quality control measures
• Perform venipuncture
• Prepare items for autoclaving including sterilization

5. Patient Education
• Reinforce patient plan of care:
  o Disease prevention
  o Health maintenance
  o Treatment plan
• Considers communication barriers, cultural diversity, and developmental life stage
• Reinforce patient’s special dietary needs (e.g. diabetes, hypertension)
• Use feedback techniques to obtain patient information (reflection, restatement, clarification)
• Use medical terminology correctly/pronounced accurately to communicate information to providers and patients

6. General Office Duties
• Compose professional correspondence utilizing electronic technology
• Demonstrate professional telephone techniques, and document telephone messages accurately
• Develop/facilitate referrals to community resources
• Evaluate the work environment to identify unsafe working conditions
• Manage appointment schedule using established priorities
• Perform routine maintenance of administrative or clinical equipment

Advanced skills for medical assisting

1. Medication Process
• Administer medications via the following routes:
  o Intradermal
  o NG/G-tube
  o Ophthalmic
  o Otic
  o Per rectum
  o Topical
• Administers, tracks and controls testosterone according to policy
• Document medications by history in EHR
• Perform medication refills per policy
• Place TB skin test and read per policy
• Follows post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) policy
• Utilize approved standing orders for medication administration (e.g. vaccines)

2. Specimen Collection and Results Reporting
• Inform patients of test results under the direction of the provider

3. Procedure and Exam
• Perform simple dressing changes
  o Remove and redress per provider direction
• Ensure liquid nitrogen is stored and handled according to policy
• Remove sutures/staples after wound evaluation by provider

4. Patient Education
• Utilize preprinted education from EHR

5. General Office Duties
• Order and manage medication stock including vaccines
• Processes telephone messages:
  o Gathers pertinent patient information for medical decision making by the provider
  o Responds to patient message based on the direction from the provider

Headquartered in Phoenix, Banner Health treats more than 300,000 patients a year in acute care and ambulatory care settings across seven states in the southwest US. Practice sites include family practice offices, specialty care clinics, urgent care centers and school-based clinics.