Medical Assistant

A Medical Assistant (MA) is an integral member of the health care delivery team, qualified by education and experience to work in the administrative office, the examining room and the physician office laboratory. The Medical Assistant, also a liaison between the doctor and the patient, is of vital importance to the success of the medical practice.

Nature of the Work

Medical assistants complete administrative and clinical tasks in the offices of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and other health practitioners. Their duties vary with the location, specialty, and size of the practice. Medical assistants typically do the following:

- Take and record patient history and personal information
- Measure vital signs
- Help the physician with patient examinations
- Give patient injections as directed by the physician
- Schedule patient appointments
- Prepare blood for laboratory tests

Electronic health records (EHRs) are changing medical assistants’ jobs. More and more physicians are adopting EHRs, moving all their patient information online. Assistants need to learn the EHR software that their office uses.

Medical assistants take and record patients’ personal information. They must be able to keep that information confidential and discuss it only with other medical personnel who are involved in treating the patient.

Medical assistants should not be confused with physician assistants, who examine, diagnose, and treat patients under a physician's supervision. For more information, see the profile on physician assistants.

In larger practices or hospitals, medical assistants may specialize in either administrative or clinical work.

Administrative medical assistants often fill out insurance forms or code patients’ medical information. Some assistants buy and store supplies and equipment for the office.

Clinical medical assistants have different duties, depending on the state where they work. They may do basic laboratory tests, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments. They might have additional responsibilities, such as instructing patients about medication or special diets, preparing patients for X rays, removing stitches, drawing blood, or changing dressings.
Some medical assistants specialize in a specific type of medical office.

**Ophthalmic medical assistants and optometric assistants** help ophthalmologists and optometrists, respectively, provide eye care. They show patients how to insert, remove, and care for contact lenses. Ophthalmic medical assistants also may help an ophthalmologist in surgery.

**Podiatric medical assistants** work closely with podiatrists (foot doctors). They may make castings of feet, expose and develop x rays, and help podiatrists in surgery.

**Education and Training**

Most employers prefer graduates who graduated from an accredited Medical Assisting program. Accredited Medical Assisting programs are offered in postsecondary vocational schools, junior colleges and in colleges and universities. Postsecondary programs usually last either one year or less which results in a certificate or diploma or two years with an associate degree.

Formal training is not mandatory but recommended. Some high schools offer courses covering those needed and, with the volunteering in a health care setting, provide enough education to begin a career in Medical Assisting. However, without formal training, certification is not eligible until five years of experience is reached. Formal education is recommended by many employers. Most accredited programs include an internship that provides practical experience in a hospital, healthcare facility or physician's office.

**Accredited Programs:** At least two agencies are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education: Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) and the Accreditation Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). There are currently about 700 Medical Assisting programs accredited by these two organizations.

**Certification/Licensing:** There is no licensing for Medical Assistants, however, some states require them to take a test or course before they can perform certain job duties, such as x-rays. Employers prefer to hire experienced workers and many prefer certified applicants who have passed a national examination, indicating that the Medical Assistant meet certain standards of competence.

**Advancement:** Medical Assistants are able to advance to office manager or a variety of administrative duties and may teach Medical Assisting courses after a number of years of experience. Some Medical Assistants return to school for more education to become nurses, Medical Laboratory Technicians, Medical Technologists or enter into other health related occupations. Some Medical Assistants also certify as Phlebotomy Technicians (the practice of drawing blood) and Medical Administrative Specialists in addition to their Medical Assisting certification.

**Employment**

Medical assistants held about 560,800 jobs in 2012. Most of these assistants work in physicians’ offices and other healthcare facilities. In 2012, more than half of all medical assistants worked in physicians’ offices.

Employment is expected to grow by 29 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Demand will stem from physicians hiring more medical assistants to do routine administrative and clinical duties so that physicians can see more patients.
The growth of the aging baby-boom population will continue to spur demand for preventive medical services, which are often provided by physicians. As their practices expand, physicians will hire more assistants to perform routine administrative and clinical duties, allowing the physicians to see more patients. Assistants will likely continue to be used in place of more expensive workers, such as nurses, to reduce costs.

In addition, an increasing number of group practices, clinics, and other healthcare facilities need support workers, particularly medical assistants, to do both administrative and clinical duties. Medical assistants work mostly in primary care, a steadily growing sector of the healthcare industry.

Additional demand also is expected as a result of new and changing tasks for medical assistants as part of the medical team. As more and more physicians’ practices switch to electronic health records (EHRs), medical assistants’ job responsibilities will continue to change. Assistants will need to become familiar with EHR computer software, including maintaining EHR security and analyzing electronic data, to improve healthcare information.

Salary
The earnings of Medical Assistants vary, depending on their experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of Medical Assistants were $29,370 in May 2012. The middle 50 percent earned between $24,370 and $34,450. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $21,080, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $41,570. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical assistants in May 2010 were:

- General medical and surgical hospitals $30,770
- Outpatient care centers $30,490
- Offices of physicians $30,110
- Offices of other health practitioners $26,820