

Medical Assistants: Return on Investment Personified

Utilizing medical assistants in a physician's practice can generate a very high rate of return, touching all three cornerstones of the practice: patients, staff, and doctors. Medical assistants can help enhance the experience for patients before, during and after visits. As the medical assistant handles routine tasks, other staff can focus on their core competencies, making a more efficient and effective team environment. The doctors reap the benefits of lower costs, higher efficiency, and a practice that runs like a well-oiled machine.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, about 62 percent of medical assistants work in offices of physicians. Employment is projected to grow much faster than average, ranking medical assistants among the fastest growing occupations over the 2006-16 decade. This is no surprise, since over the last ten years, as the nursing shortage became a serious challenge; the need for medical assistants became quite evident.



The medical assistant occupation may be considered a “hybrid” occupation that emerged to fulfill a particular need. It is a “hybrid” because medical assistants typically perform a variety of job functions that otherwise might have been filled by a number of different employees. For example, medical assistants can provide services typically provided by receptionists, billing clerks, and even nurses. Medical assistants can be extremely valuable in the physician's office for many reasons, the top two reasons being the wide variety of tasks that may be performed and the overall cost savings to the practice.

Benefits to the Staff

Overall, medical assistants can ease the burden of a busy physician's office staff. Medical assistants can function as both hands-on medical support as well as office administration. According to Dr. Nitin Sardesai, MD, a family practice physician located in northwest Indiana, “They are also key players as they interact with the other medical assistants and staff within the office. There is a synergy among the medical assistants and other staff that makes everyone's workload more manageable.” (See the list of tasks that may be performed by a medical assistant.)

Dr. Marc Kleinberg, MD, an Obstetrics and Gynecology physician with The Association of Women's Healthcare in Chicago, Illinois, is pleased with the medical assistants who work within their practice. “With an extremely high volume of patients, and multiple partners in the practice, it can get hectic; however, the medical assistants help to facilitate a smooth operation.”

*MA's can help optimize patient flow,
enabling the physician to see more patients
and conduct more robust visits.*

Benefits to the Patient

Using a medical assistant helps with patient flow from beginning to end. The medical assistant can ensure that the patient receives adequate information throughout the process. Patients do have a choice, within obvious insurance constraints, as to where they have their medical needs met. Utilizing a medical assistant helps to foster excellent patient relations.

“Patients come first...it is a team effort,” according to Jane Correa, RMA, RPT, a medical assistant in Dr. Sardesai’s office. In a typical day, Correa is responsible for a variety of activities. She will assess patients and complete specific tests, including blood work. Like other medical assistants, she completes prescription forms and orders tests under a doctor’s supervision, calls in prescriptions, handles charts, reviews test results and action items with patients. Correa also handles patient telephone inquiries. She orders drugs and other medical supplies for the office.

Although doctors give medical advice, the medical assistant is an important link between the doctor and the patient. The medical assistant will review the situation with the doctor and receive instructions that will then be relayed to the patient. Patients spend less time waiting for answers to their questions, because they do not have to wait for the physician to contact them directly. Medical assistants share the quality care that patients require, all driven by the physician.

Benefits to the Doctor

Using a medical assistant helps the doctor in several ways. It makes the office more efficient. Staff perform those duties that they were trained to do rather than needing to try to quickly master unfamiliar responsibilities. This allows the doctor to provide better service because resources are used to their optimum. The practice can grow without adding a lot to overhead, because medical assistants are a cost effective way to address a growing workload as the demands on the practice increase.

Medical assistants are a cost-effective way to maintain excellent patient relations between the busy doctor and the patient who needs information. The doctor can feel comfortable letting the qualified medical assistant help patients on more administrative matters as well as on some medical issues. For example, medical assistants can address insurance questions, help arrange for hospital admissions and lab tests, take medical histories and prep patients for exams. “They are valuable to me because they can act as a liaison with my patients,” Dr. Sardesai said.

Hiring a Qualified Medical Assistant

A medical assistant may have training that ranges from on-the-job training up to a two-year formal educational program. To ensure the medical assistant has the best foundation of knowledge, be sure to hire one who has a credential issued by an organization such as American Medical Technologists (www.amt1.com).

Make certain that the organization granting the credential requires the medical assistant to take appropriate and relevant continuing education in order to maintain the credential. Determine if the examination is competency based, similar to the test given by the American Medical Technologists. Assure yourself that the program is based on a comprehensive body of knowledge in the field.

According to AMT Executive Director Chris Damon, “If your medical assistant has not yet earned the credential, you may want to encourage his or her participation. If you are in the hiring process, you may wish to use the credential as just one way to identify qualified candidates. Knowing that a medical assistant has completed formal education is great. Knowing that a medical assistant completed that education and then took the necessary steps to earn the credential is even better.”

Dr. Kleinberg added, “I prefer that the medical assistants I employ maintain the credential. It gives me confidence in my hiring choices.”

Compensation

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, the earnings of medical assistants vary, depending on their experience, skill level, and location. Median annual earnings of wage-and-salary medical assistants were \$26,290 (BLS, May 2006). Employing medical assistants can really make a difference to the bottom line. As compared to other staff positions, Registered Nurses had median annual earnings of \$57,280, Licensed Practical Nurses earned \$36,550, and Billing Clerks earned \$30,020 (BLS, May 2006).

Conclusion

The benefits of utilizing medical assistants are many. The return on investment can be exponential. The extra benefit of hiring a medical assistant who has achieved the industry’s credential, and therefore has proven competency in relevant areas, is well worth the investment.

For clinical medical assistants, duties vary according to what is allowed by State law

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006 Edition*, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco>

Certification is optional for MA’s, but hiring a certified MA should provide the physician with greater assurance of MA’s competency.

Typical Tasks of Medical Assistants

- update and file patients' medical records
- complete insurance forms
- arrange for hospital admissions and laboratory services
- answer telephones
- greet patients
- handle correspondence
- schedule appointments
- handle billing and bookkeeping
- take medical histories and record vital signs
- explain treatment procedures to patients
- prepare patients for examinations
- assist physicians during examinations
- collect and prepare laboratory specimens
- perform basic laboratory tests on the premises
- dispose of contaminated supplies
- sterilize medical instruments
- instruct patients about medications and special diets
- prepare and administer medications as directed by a physician
- authorize drug refills as directed
- telephone prescriptions to a pharmacy
- draw blood
- prepare patients for x-rays
- take electrocardiograms
- remove sutures
- change dressings
- arrange examining room instruments and equipment
- purchase and maintain supplies and equipment
- keep waiting and examining rooms neat and clean



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