

Scope of Practice for Medical Assistants

Question

What should healthcare providers be cognizant of regarding the duties, scope of practice, and supervision for medical assistants?

Answer

In some states, medical assistants (MAs) have a clearly stated scope of practice, and healthcare providers should fully understand and comply with their state's laws and guidance to avoid any liability allegations. Helpful resources from professional associations regarding state laws include:

- [American Association of Medical Assistants: State Scope of Practice Laws](#)
- [American Medical Technologists: Compendium of State Laws and Rules Authorizing and Regulating Medical Assisting Practice](#)
- [National Registry of Medical Assistants: State Scope of Practice Laws](#)

Some states do not have laws or guidance related to MA scope of practice. In these states, healthcare organizations should clearly specify the duties that MAs may perform as well as those that they may not perform. Organizations also should designate supervising physicians to delegate those duties as specified.

States that regulate the scope of practice for MAs typically limit duties to basic administrative, clerical, clinical, and technical supportive services. In states without regulations, healthcare organizations must consider what duties are appropriate to delegate to unlicensed staff members. However, MAs may not diagnose or treat, nor perform any task that is invasive or requires assessment. It is also unacceptable to use MAs to replace highly trained, licensed professionals. Ultimately, employers and supervising providers are responsible and liable for MAs.

Examples of duties that may fall within an MA's scope of practice include:

- Performing basic clinical tasks under a licensed provider's supervision.
- Answering telephones and scheduling patient appointments, including determining the level of care and length of appointment using office protocols provided by the supervising provider.
- Arranging exam room instruments and equipment.
- Escorting patients to exam rooms, measuring and recording vital signs, and preparing patients for exams.
- Interviewing patients, recording their medical history and personal information, and recording test results in the health record.
- Conveying clinical information on behalf of the treating provider, and providing patient information and instructions.
- Performing aseptic procedures such as wound care, changing wound dressings, and obtaining wound cultures.
- Removing sutures or staples from superficial incisions or lacerations.
- Operating diagnostic equipment.
- Administering certain medications as ordered by the treating provider.
- Obtaining specimens by noninvasive techniques, and collecting blood specimens via capillary and venipuncture technique.
- Performing simple laboratory and screening tests, such as urinalysis.
- Disposing of contaminated supplies and sterilizing medical instruments.
- Performing filing and bookkeeping, and processing insurance claims.
- Transcribing medical dictation for health records.
- Maintaining inventories of medical and office supplies.
- Helping patients understand their insurance coverage by completing forms, supplying coding information, and contacting insurance companies about billing.

- Relaying prescription orders or refills to the pharmacy, but only as ordered and approved by the prescribing provider.¹

Duties that generally do not fall within an MA's scope of practice include:

- Independently performing telephone triage.
- Diagnosing or treating patients.
- Independently prescribing or refilling medications.
- Interpreting test results.
- Operating laser equipment.
- Injecting medications into a vein or starting, flushing, or discontinuing IVs (unless permitted by state law).
- Making patient assessments, performing any kind of medical care decision-making, or independently advising patients about their condition or treatment regimen.
- Administering anesthetic agents (except topical numbing agents).
- Performing invasive tests or procedures.²

In addition to consulting state laws and regulations to determine MAs' scope of practice, healthcare providers should identify whether restrictions exist on who may supervise and assign duties to MAs. In states in which no laws or regulations exist regarding MA supervision, healthcare providers should still provide careful oversight to avoid liability exposure.

Resources

- [American Association of Medical Assistants: Medical Assisting Scope of Practice](#)
- [Health Services Research: New Roles for Medical Assistants in Innovative Primary Care Practices](#)
- [The Permanente Journal: An Expanded Role for the Medical Assistant in Primary Care: Evaluating a Training Pilot](#)

Endnotes

¹ Buppert, C. (2008). *Understanding medical assistant practice liability issues*. Medscape. Retrieved from www.medscape.com/viewarticle/580647; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n. d.). *Occupational outlook handbook: Medical assistants*. Retrieved from www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/medical-assistants.htm#tab-2

² Buppert, *Understanding medical assistant practice liability issues*.

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