Scope of Practice for Medical Assistants

Question
What should healthcare providers be cognizant of in terms of their medical assistants’ scope of practice?

Answer
Medical assistants have a clearly stated scope of practice in some states; however, in other states, no laws exist regarding medical assistants. Therefore, healthcare providers need to determine medical assistants’ scope of practice by checking their state’s statutes and regulations.

If no agency oversees medical assistants in a state, healthcare providers should ensure that their organizations specify the duties that medical assistants may do (and may not do) and designate supervising physicians to delegate those duties.

States that regulate the scope of practice for medical assistants typically limit duties to basic administrative, clerical, clinical, and technical supportive services. In states without regulations, physicians must consider what duties are appropriate to delegate to an unlicensed staff member. Medical assistants may not diagnose or treat nor perform any task that is invasive or requires assessment. It is not acceptable to use medical assistants to replace highly trained, licensed professionals. Ultimately, supervising physicians are responsible and liable for medical assistants.

In many states, a medical assistant’s scope of practice may include these duties:¹

- Perform basic clinical tasks under a physician’s supervision.
- Determine the acuity of an appointment and the visit length using office protocols provided by the supervising physician.
• Record patient demographics and document basic patient information using medical terminology and accepted charting abbreviations.

• Convey clinical information on behalf of the physician, and provide patient information and instructions.

• Arrange exam room instruments and equipment.

• Escort patients to exam rooms and prepare them for exams. Preparation may include draping, shaving, and disinfecting treatment sites.

• Measure and record vital signs.

• Perform aseptic procedures such as wound care, change wound dressings, and obtain wound cultures.

• Remove sutures or staples from superficial incisions or lacerations.

• Operate diagnostic equipment.

• Administer, or provide to a patient for self-administration, certain medications as ordered by the physician.

• Perform CPR and render first aid in an emergency.

• Obtain specimens by noninvasive techniques, and collect blood specimens via capillary and venipuncture technique.

• Perform simple laboratory and screening tests, such as urinalysis.

• Administer different types of cryotherapy to reduce pain or swelling.

• Perform filing and bookkeeping, and process insurance claims.

• Transcribe medical dictation for health records.

• Phone in prescription orders or refills to the pharmacy, but only as ordered and approved by the physician, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant.
A medical assistant’s scope of practice generally does not include these duties:

- Independently perform telephone triage (medical assistants are not legally authorized to analyze and interpret data or diagnose symptoms).
- Independently diagnose or treat patients.
- Inject collagen.
- Administer chemotherapy.
- Interpret the results of skin tests.
- Chart pupillary responses.
- Insert a urine catheter.
- Operate laser equipment to remove hair, wrinkles, scars, moles, or other blemishes.
- Independently prescribe medications, refill prescription requests, and distribute medication samples.
- Inject medications into a vein (unless permitted by state law).
- Start, flush, or discontinue IVs (unless permitted by state law).
- Make patient assessments, perform any kind of medical care decision-making, or independently advise patients about their condition or treatment regimen.
- Administer any anesthetic agent (except topical numbing agents such as lidocaine/prilocaine cream).
- Perform tests that involve the penetration of human tissues, except for skin tests and drawing blood as the law permits.

In addition to consulting state laws and regulations to determine medical assistants’ scope of practice, healthcare providers should identify whether restrictions exist on who may supervise and give orders to medical assistants. In states in which no laws or regulations exist regarding medical assistants, healthcare providers should use a conservative approach and provide careful supervision.
Resources

- American Association of Medical Assistants: State Scope of Practice Laws
- Medscape: Understanding Medical Assistant Practice Liability Issues


This document should not be construed as medical or legal advice. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

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