

Scope of Practice for Medical Assistants

Question

What should healthcare providers be cognizant of regarding the scope of practice for their medical assistants?

Answer

Medical assistants have a clearly stated scope of practice in some states; however, in other states, no laws or guidelines exist regarding medical assistants. So healthcare providers need to fully understand and comply with the lawful scope of practice for medical assistants in their states to avoid any liability allegations.

If no agency oversees medical assistants in a particular state, healthcare providers should ensure that their organizations specify the duties that medical assistants may perform as well as those that they may not perform. They also should designate supervising physicians to delegate those duties as specified.

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, healthcare providers must consider what duties are appropriate to delegate to unlicensed staff members. However, medical assistants may not diagnose or treat nor perform any task that is invasive or requires assessment. It is also unacceptable 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.

However, 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 practiced, 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 provide careful supervision to avoid liability.

Resources

- American Academy of Family Physicians: What A Medical Assistant Can Do For Your Practice
- 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
- Medscape: Understanding Medical Assistant Practice Liability Issues

¹ Buppert, C. (2008). *Understanding medical assistant practice liability issues*. Medscape. Retrieved from www.medscape.com/viewarticle/580647

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