The Role of the Medical Assistant in Your Office Practice

As the first medical professional liability insurer to establish a patient safety department, The Doctors Company remains the leader in developing innovative tools that can help you reduce risk and keep your patients safe.

A medical assistant (MA) can be a versatile and valuable addition to your office practice. The MA can manage front-office functions and patient flow plus handle some clinical duties. However, relying on the MA to perform tasks outside the MA’s scope of practice can place both you and your patients at risk.

Provide adequate guidance and oversight.
- Determine the skill level and capabilities of each MA you supervise.
- Delineate the MA’s responsibilities in a written job description.
- Provide direct supervision until the MA demonstrates the required level of competency.
- Assess the quality of the MA’s work on a periodic basis.

Know your state’s MA scope of practice.
The MA’s scope of practice varies by state, and some states don’t address scope of practice at all. The MA generally works under the license of the supervising physician.
- Be aware that different states allow an MA to perform different clinical functions.
- Use specific protocols, orders, and directions so that the MA knows how to perform a procedure and that all MAs in your office perform duties consistently.
- Consult with your state licensing board or your patient safety specialist from The Doctors Company if you have questions about scope of practice.

Do not assign the MA to telephone triage. Only physicians or qualified staff such as an RN, an NP, or a PA should provide telephone advice. Written protocols must be utilized by the office staff and should include instructions on what questions to ask the caller, recommended responses for minor problems, and which calls to be referred immediately to a doctor.

Differentiate those tasks that only a licensed clinician should perform.
The MA cannot make independent medical assessments, triage, prescribe, renew prescriptions, or give any type of medical advice—even if asked.
- Caution your MA about patients asking for the MA’s opinion, even in a casual conversation.
- The MA can convey clinical information on behalf of the physician and follow clinical protocols when speaking with patients.
- Do not refer to your MA as a “nurse.” The term nurse implies advanced education and licensure.

Understand how to improve your MA’s practice.
- Ask your MA to pursue certification.
- Provide periodic in-service training and skill verification.
- Create a culture where the MA can ask questions and bring forth concerns about the tasks the MA is asked to perform.
- Don’t ask the MA to perform any duties that run counter to the scope of practice within your state or that conflict with the written job description.

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Founded by doctors for doctors in 1976 to advance, protect, and reward the practice of good medicine, The Doctors Company is the nation’s largest insurer of physician and surgeon medical liability. For more information on our innovative patient safety products and services, please call (800) 421-2368, extension 1243, or visit us at www.thedoctors.com/patientsafety.

The guidelines suggested here are not rules, do not constitute legal advice, and do not ensure a successful outcome. The ultimate decision regarding the appropriateness of any treatment must be made by each health care provider in light of all circumstances prevailing in the individual situation and in accordance with the laws of the jurisdiction in which the care is rendered.