THE MEDICAL ASSISTING PROFESSION

SCENARIO

Sandra Ramirez is a single mother who has decided on medical assisting as a career. She has always been interested in the medical field and wants a job that will allow her to spend evenings and weekends with her 3-year-old son, Roberto. The idea of working in a physician's office appeals to her, and she has applied to a school that is close to her apartment and day care provider. She plans to attend day classes and work part-time after school until it is time to pick up her son.

Sandra is very excited about her new career and has set several goals for her training. First, she hopes to attain perfect attendance, and second, she would like to graduate with honors. She has budgeted her study time and plans to ask her instructors during the first 2 weeks of school for suggestions on how she can better prepare for classes and examinations. Sandra will find medical assisting to be a rewarding career and respected profession.

While studying this chapter, think about the following questions:

- What obstacles might prevent Sandra from attending all of her classes, and how can she prepare in advance to overcome them?
- What goals might Sandra have at the commencement of her training? At the end of training?
- How can Sandra begin to explore the type of physician offices in which she would enjoy being employed after graduation?
- How can Sandra make the most of her time attending school to become a medical assistant?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define, spell, and pronounce the terms listed in the vocabulary.
2. Briefly discuss the history of medical assisting as a profession.
3. Differentiate between administrative and clinical medical assisting duties and have knowledge of the general responsibilities of the medical assistant.
4. Discuss the versatility of a career in medical assisting.
5. Comprehend the current employment outlook for the medical assistant.
6. Give the reasons that hiring an individual with no formal training often is more expensive than hiring a professional medical assistant.
7. Identify several considerations to keep in mind, other than financial compensation, when choosing a position as a medical assistant.
8. Discuss the aspects of the medical assistant's performance on a successful externship.
9. List three unacceptable behaviors on the externship site.
10. Explain why continuing education is so important to the medical assistant.
11. Understand medical assistant credentialing requirements, the importance of credentialing, and the process of obtaining credentialing.
12. Discuss the difference between a CMA and an RMA.
VOCABULARY

Allied health fields: Occupational disciplines in which professionals involved with the delivery of healthcare or related services assist physicians with the diagnosis, treatment, and care of patients in many different specialty areas.

Benefits: Services or payments provided under a health plan, employee plan, or some other agreement, including programs such as health insurance, pensions, retirement planning, and many other options that may be offered to employees of a company or organization.

Certification: (ser-tuh-fuh-ka’-shun) The attesting of something as being true as represented or as meeting a standard; the result of having been tested, usually by a third party, and awarded a certificate based on proven knowledge.

Continuing education units (CEUs): Credits for courses, classes, or seminars related to an individual’s profession that are designed to promote education and to keep the professional up to date on current procedures and trends in the field; CEUs are often required for licensing.

Cross-training: Training in more than one area so that a multitude of duties may be performed by one person or so that substitutions of personnel may be made in an emergency or at other necessary times.

Externship (or internship): A training program that is part of the medical assisting course of study in an educational institution; this part of training is taken in the actual business setting of that field of study; the terms are interchanged in some areas of the country.

Intangibles: (in-tan’-juh-buls) Qualities that cannot be perceived, especially by touch, or cannot be precisely identified or realized by the mind.

Invasive: Involving entry into the living body, as by incision or insertion of an instrument.

Perks: Extra advantages or benefits of working in a specific job that may or may not be commonplace in that particular profession; a shortened form of perquisites.

Phlebotomy: (flih-bah’-tuh-mee) An invasive procedure used to obtain a blood specimen for testing, experimentation, or diagnosis of disease.

Profit sharing: Offer of a part of a company’s profits to employees or other designated individuals or groups.

Stock options: Offers of stocks for purchase to a certain group of individuals or certain groups, such as employees of a for-profit hospital.

Versatile: (vur’-suh-til) Embracing a variety of subjects, fields, or skills; having a wide range of abilities.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook, medical assisting will be one of the fastest growing occupations in the United States during the decade from 2004 to 2014. Much of this growth will be the result of an increase in the number of group practices, clinics, and office facilities that need a high number of support personnel. This makes the medical assistant who can handle both clinical and administrative duties particularly valuable to the physician.

A career as a medical assistant is challenging and offers job satisfaction, opportunities for service, financial reward, and possibilities for advancement. Men and women can be equally successful as medical assistants. Individuals considering the medical assisting discipline must be dedicated and committed and must have a strong desire to become caregivers. Caregivers are people who have the ability to put the needs of the patient first and have a sincere concern for those who are not at their best. A caregiver must feel an obligation to assist the patient in whatever way possible and have patience with those who, at times, are more difficult. This strong inner desire is one of the most important qualities of the successful professional medical assistant. Through development of this “care giving” mentality, many personal rewards will follow, as will a long and beneficial career.

THE HISTORY OF MEDICAL ASSISTING

The first medical assistant was probably a neighbor of a physician who was called on to help when an extra pair of hands was needed. As time passed and the practice of medicine became more organized and more complicated, some physicians hired nurses to help in their office practices. Gradually, record keeping, data reporting, and an increasing number of business details became important to physicians, and they realized a need for an assistant with both administrative and clinical training. Nurses were likely to have training only in clinical skills; therefore many physicians began training them or other individuals to assist with all of the office duties. Community and junior colleges began offering training programs that focused on both administrative and clinical skills in the late 1940s. Medical assistant organizations at the local and state level began developing around 1950, and soon after, certifying examinations became available. Today medical assisting is one of the most respected allied health fields in the industry, and training is readily available through community colleges, junior colleges, and private educational institutions throughout the United States.

The American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) was co-founded by Mary E. Kinn, who served as the organization’s president in 1958. She helped to establish a certifying program for members of the AAMA and chaired the certifying branch in 1959. Kinn authored this textbook from 1967 through 1999 and then retired. She is greatly respected for her contributions to the field of medical assisting.

THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE OF A MEDICAL ASSISTANT

Today’s medical assistant is a versatile professional. The duties that medical assistants perform vary not only from office to office, but even within the same office. Medical assistants perform routine duties within the offices of many types of health professionals, including physicians, chiropractors, podiatrists, and others. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, 6 out
The responsibilities of a medical assistant include both administrative and clinical duties.

of 10 medical assistants work in a physician’s office. Individuals with medical assisting training can accomplish various jobs in the hospital environment, and some are employed by freestanding emergency centers or surgery centers. Opportunities for medical assistants are growing because of the constant change within the medical profession and the surge of cross-training, which means that one individual is trained to do a variety of duties. Medical assistants work under the direct supervision of a physician in the office and perform tasks delegated by the doctor or supervisor.

The AAMA once defined the scope of practice as the “performance of delegated clinical and administrative duties within the supervising physician’s scope of practice consistent with the medical assistant’s education, training, and experience.” This definition remains accurate today. The duties performed by the medical assistant do not constitute the practice of medicine.

The two major categories of duties that medical assistants perform are administrative tasks and clinical tasks (Figure 3-1). On the administrative end of the spectrum, medical assistants greet patients who arrive in the office or clinic and obtain basic registration information. They may enter information into a computer and assemble the patient’s medical record. They are trained to do office accounting, which may be done electronically or manually. The medical assistant is trained in filing procedures and in proper techniques for adding information to the medical record. A basic knowledge of procedure and diagnosis coding is important today, and some medical assistants concentrate strictly on the billing and coding career option. They are able to complete insurance claim forms and determine insurance coverage and limitations for the patient. Medical assistants answer telephones, schedule appointments, update medical records, and handle all types of correspondence. Often the medical assistant schedules outpatient procedures and hospital admissions and may coordinate consultations with physicians. Those who enjoy the administrative side of the profession often enter into office management positions.

The clinical duties that medical assistants perform are just as broad as the administrative duties. These professionals prepare patients and the equipment needed before examinations and assist the physician during patients’ office visits. They assist with or perform basic testing procedures and are usually proficient in phlebotomy. Medical assistants are trained in first aid skills and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. They collect and prepare laboratory specimens, and they know how to follow the regulations established by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendment (CLIA). Often medical assistants working in the clinical area are responsible for inventoring and ordering supplies. When directed by a physician and allowed by the state, they may administer various types of medications and perform x-ray examinations, if trained to do so. Medical assistants also perform electrocardiograms and prepare patients for x-ray evaluations. They assist in minor surgical procedures, prepare sterile trays, and perform autoclave sterilization procedures for instruments. Other clinical duties involve taking medical histories from patients, patient teaching, and obtaining and recording vital signs. Medical assistants who enjoy the clinical side of the profession may become office managers or may supervise other medical assistants.

Duties and restrictions related to medical assisting vary from state to state, but in most of the United States, the medical assistant performs as an agent of the physician and is under the physician’s supervision. This means that the medical assistant performs actions that he or she is told to perform by the physician and that the physician is responsible for those actions. The command may be related to the medical assistant from the physician verbally, through a supervisor, or by way of the office policy and procedure manual. Respondeat superior is a Latin term meaning “let the master answer.” Physicians are responsible not only for their own actions, but for the actions of employees performing within the scope of their employment.

**Critical Thinking Application 3-1**

- Sandra is not sure whether she will enjoy administrative or clinical assisting more. How can she begin to explore both avenues during her classroom training? During her externship or internship?
- How could Sandra explore the medical specialties and determine what areas might be of interest to her as a potential job site?
A CAREER IN MEDICAL ASSISTING

Trained medical assistants are equipped with a flexible, adaptable career in which they experience the rewards of helping other people (Figure 3-2). The skills acquired by the medical assistant are valuable, and employment is readily available anywhere in the world that medicine is practiced. Many medical assistants pursue their careers far beyond the usual retirement age, because physicians realize the value of the experienced, mature employee. This career attracts the nontraditional student who may be older than the average postsecondary student by a decade or more. Although many older students feel intimidated by the classroom, they often have excellent experiences in school and reach the top of the class. Medical assisting is more than suitable for the student just exiting high school. Many individuals plan to work as medical assistants to earn a viable income while pursuing further academic studies.

The practice of medicine has changed dramatically in the past several decades. Increasing costs have created a trend away from hospital-based treatment and toward the delivery of care in physicians' offices and in outpatient ambulatory clinics. Although physicians have employed medical assistants in their practices for many years, computerization and technologic advances have created more opportunities for formally trained medical assistants, and their responsibilities have similarly increased. Clearly defined educational requirements have been established, and this has resulted in improvement of the quality and accessibility of medical assistant training. These requirements have also helped create a healthy respect for medical assistants, who are considered an integral part of today's allied health field.

Employment for medical assistants is abundant. According to the Department of Labor, the medical assisting field is projected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations, with a 34% expected growth from 2008 to 2018. In the United States in 2008, approximately 483,600 jobs were held by medical assistants; approximately 62% of those were in physicians' offices, 13% in public and private hospitals, and another 11% in other facilities, such as chiropractors' and podiatrists' offices. The projected employment for 2018 is 647,500 medical assistants. According to the Labor Department, job growth will be so high because of the increasing number of group practices, clinics, and other healthcare facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel, particularly medical assistants who can handle both administrative and clinical duties. Jobs may also be available with federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Public Health Service, and armed forces clinics or hospitals.

Most medical assistants derive a high degree of satisfaction from their work. Job turnover among medical assistants is surprisingly low; some begin working with a physician when the practice is opened and stay until the physician's retirement. In the past, physicians often would hire any individual to perform office and clinical duties, but these people frequently were untrained and unprofessional; they therefore could be paid a minimum amount for their work. Most physicians have learned that hiring an untrained person to work in the medical office usually is more expensive in the long run. Untrained assistants often make errors that are costly to the practice, and these assistants require much more supervision. Formal training and certification are valuable not only to the medical assistant, but also to the physician-employer.

Medical assistants are compensated in various ways, some by hourly wages and some by salary. The earnings vary from place to place. Overall, medical assistants can expect a healthy return on their investment in training, experience, and skills. Most physicians realize that a good medical assistant is worth a higher than average wage, and a medical assistant with formal training is almost always compensated on a higher scale than one with no training. The Occupational Outlook Handbook reports statistics on the average salaries for many different career fields, including medical assisting. (This information can be accessed at www.bls.gov/oco. Annual salary updates are also available on the site.)

More information on salaries may be obtained by monitoring the local classified advertisements and by checking online job information on sites such as Yahoo! Careers. Medical assistants must determine a realistic entering salary for their geographic area. Often graduates expect to make a much higher salary than is reasonable right after graduation with little or no experience. The medical field offers great benefits to employees. Usually, the larger the organization, the better the benefits and perks. Most employers offer a health insurance plan or managed care plan to their employees. Often a life insurance program is included, and dental insurance is always a valuable benefit. Some companies have profit-sharing plans and stock options, as well as a retirement plan. Some organizations give their employees access to credit unions and many have discount options at local businesses, such as uniform shops. Other benefits may include uniform stipends or reimbursement, as well as tuition reimbursement and continuing education allowances. Remember that you should consider benefits and perks when contemplating a job opportunity. Many medical assistants may choose to work for less money if the benefits and the opportunities for advancement are good. Consider driving time, holidays, paid parking, sick days, vacation days, and facilities when choosing a job. Do the coworkers seem to enjoy one another's company and get along? Is the physician friendly or more aloof? All of these should be weighed carefully before the final decision is made as to which
position to accept. Some facilities pay more and offer fewer benefits, whereas others pay less and offer more benefits. It is a truism that “money is a byproduct of services rendered.” Nowhere is this more accurate than in the medical field. When the patients are served well, the medical assistant becomes more and more valuable to the employer and is compensated accordingly.

CRITICAL THINKING APPLICATION 3-2

- Sandra knows that she needs certain benefits as a single mother. What might she need to look for in a potential job after her graduation?
- What are some ways Sandra can compare positions and opportunities?
- What types of Web sites might help Sandra learn about opportunities in her geographic location?

PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE

A well-groomed medical assistant in appropriate attire has a positive psychological effect on patients. The essentials of a professional appearance are good health, good grooming, and suitable dress.

Good health requires adequate sleep, balanced meals, and enough exercise to keep fit. Medical assistants can set a good example by living a sensible, healthy lifestyle that includes regular checkups for their own physical condition, both medical and dental. A radiantly healthy office staff presents the best possible public relations image for the physician.

Good grooming is little more than attention to the details of personal appearance. Personal cleanliness, which includes taking a daily bath or shower, using deodorant, and practicing good oral hygiene, is vital. Perfume and after-shave cologne should not be used or should be applied lightly, because patients and co-workers may be allergic to some scents. Makeup should be conservative and applied moderately. Heavy or exaggerated makeup is out of place in the professional office; subtle eye and lip makeup is best. Clear or muted shades of nail polish are best, and long nails are not only inappropriate but can be dangerous to the patient and the medical assistant. Nails must be kept clean and at a very conservative length. The medical assistant’s hair should be shiny, clean, neatly styled, and off the collar.

Medical assistants usually wear a uniform or laboratory coat; this not only presents a professional appearance, but also identifies the assistant as a member of the healthcare team (Figure 3-3). Medical professionals rarely wear traditional white in today’s medical facilities, although it is appropriate if allowed in the office policy manual. Fashionable styling makes it possible for the medical assistant’s uniform to be both practical and attractive. Women may choose to wear pantsuits, which are available in white or a variety of colors; a two-piece dress uniform in white or a color; an attractively styled traditional white uniform; or a scrub set. Scrubs have become increasingly popular and much more attractive over the past decade. They are often made of pretty fabrics in rich colors and patterns and are much better suited for the professional office than the old green or blue scrubs worn in the surgical suites of hospitals.

Men may also wear the newer scrubs or may choose white slacks with a white or colored shirt, jacket, or pullover top. If it is acceptable in the facility, a lab coat may be worn over street clothes, but it is important that the lab coat be buttoned when invasive procedures are performed. Uniforms should be laundered daily and neatly pressed, because medical assistants are exposed to ill patients throughout the workday. Shoes should be appropriate for a uniform, spotless, and comfortable. Many attractive styles that resemble running or tennis shoes are available at uniform shops, specially conditioned for the medical professional who is on his or her feet most of the day. White shoes must be kept white by daily cleaning and touchups. Remember that if laced shoes are worn, the laces also need cleaning.

In some facilities, the physician prefers that the staff not wear uniforms. Some psychiatrists and some pediatricians, for example, believe that the clinical appearance of a uniform may affect patients adversely. However, today’s uniforms reflect so many styles and patterns that the right one for the particular office should be readily available. Some of the fabrics depict cartoon characters or drawings that will appeal to children yet still function as a durable uniform. A medical assistant who does not wear a uniform should follow the dictates of good taste and should be conservative in choosing a professional wardrobe. Jeans are rarely acceptable in the medical facility, unless the office is extremely casual or it is a special day.

The garments worn while on duty must be comfortable, allow for easy movement, and still look fresh at the end of a busy day. Whatever uniform style the assistant chooses, it should be personally becoming and worn over appropriate undergarments. The lines, colors, and ornamentation of the undergarments should not be seen through the uniform; therefore, it is best to wear a neutral color without a pattern. Thongs and high-cut underwear should be avoided. When a uniform is worn, jewelry should be limited to an engagement ring, wedding band, and professional pin. No more than two earrings per ear lobe should be worn, and the clothing or hairstyle should always cover tattoos.

Facial and tongue piercings are unacceptable in the medical arena and must be removed during working hours. A name badge will help patients identify each staff person by name.
Make sure the dress code required in the office setting is clearly understood. Adherence to that code is a demonstration of responsibility and willingness to cooperate with office rules. Compliance with office regulations is a factor in decisions on office promotions.

**EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Ideally, a medical assistant should have both administrative and clinical skills, although he or she may have a personal preference for one over the other. The physician’s staff must be able to handle all responsibilities of the office except those requiring the services of the physician or another licensed professional. In an office with several assistants, each should be able and willing to substitute in an emergency for any of the others and should be cross-trained to perform each others’ duties. Teamwork is a very important part of any occupation and even more so in the medical environment.

Certain knowledge and skills are expected of a trained medical assistant. The skills mentioned in this chapter are not all-inclusive; rather, they suggest what may be expected on entry into employment as a professional medical assistant.

**Classroom Training**

Formal training is essential for today’s medical assistant. Many community colleges, junior colleges, and private career institutions offer courses in medical assisting. After satisfactory completion of the program, the student usually receives a certificate or diploma. Private career institutions offer training that usually takes 7 to 10 months to complete, and they offer enrollment as often as monthly. Students who attend community colleges, junior colleges, and some private career institutions to study medical assisting may complete the educational requirements to obtain an associate’s degree in medical assisting. Courses at the community college level usually take 1 to 2 years to complete and offer enrollment from every few weeks to two or three times a year.

Currently the trend is toward offering the medical assisting program in modules, so that the student receives some clinical training, some administrative training, and some theory in each module taken. Some classes are taught in traditional classrooms, and the clinical aspect usually is taught in a laboratory at the school. Much of the equipment the medical assistant will use in practice is found in the laboratory, such as an autoclave, medical instruments and trays, and specimen collection equipment. Medical assisting training usually involves the study of medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, aseptic technique, clinical procedures, medical law and ethics, principles of pharmacology, insurance billing and coding, receptionist and telephone technique, patient communication, human relations, management duties, and receptionist duties, among other subjects.

Instructors are important allies of medical assisting students pursuing their education, and the relationship between instructor and student should be one of mutual respect. Students must realize that instructors have a strong desire to share their knowledge and that they want each student to succeed. Individual schools have certain rules and regulations that must be enforced, many of them a result of state or federal regulation or legislation. The guidelines that students must follow are not designed to hinder the education, but rather to ensure that graduates are competent medical assistants. Students should complete assignments accurately, turn them in on time, and take pride in all the work they do for class. They should never miss school days unless absolutely necessary, and they should develop good habits in school so that they become valuable assets to future employers.

**CRITICAL THINKING APPLICATION**

- How can Sandra develop a positive, nurturing relationship with her instructors?
- What should she do if she has difficulty in the classroom or if her grades begin to fall?
- How can Sandra study effectively and prepare for examinations?

**Externships and Internships**

Medical assisting training programs require an externship or internship before the student graduates. Most medical assisting programs use the term externship. This on the job training allows students to put the skills they have learned in the classroom to use with real patients and staff members. In most cases, externships are unpaid positions that are part of the medical assistant training program, not a separate entity. Most accreditation organizations do not allow student externs to be paid.

The physician, probably more than any other employer, expects employees to carry out their duties independently, with little or no direct supervision. Someone at the externship site is designated as the student’s supervisor. The medical assisting student should consult frequently with the externship supervisor to determine what is expected of the student and what progress is being made (Figure 3-4).

The student must be open to constructive criticism and must be a willing learner. Techniques may be learned on the externship that were not included in the classroom training, or optional methods may be taught for various procedures. The medical assistant should never argue with the staff at the clinical site that a method taught by the school is the only correct way. Often several methods can be used to obtain the same result.
medical assisting student should treat the externship experience as if it were a probationary period on an actual job. Remember, the externship often is the first medical reference the student will be able to list on the resume.

Several general rules must be remembered on the externship site. First, the medical assistant must gain the trust of the employees there. The student should perform the assigned duties eagerly, in a timely manner, and to the best of the student's ability. If questions arise at any time, the student should ask the externship supervisor instead of assuming or performing the duties the wrong way.

It is often helpful to read the job description of the medical assistant in the facility so that the student will understand what is expected. The student medical assistant must show responsibility and dependability. The student must remain busy while at the externship site. If all assigned duties have been completed, the extern should offer to assist others in their duties or ask for additional responsibilities. Counters always need cleaning, and filing always needs to be done. The student who performs these duties without being told shows initiative and a strong work ethic. In addition, all the rules for professional appearance apply to the site and should be followed meticulously, because the student medical assistant will be working with actual patients.

The medical assistant may find it necessary to educate the patient about what a medical assistant is and does. Patients often assume that those assisting in the office are nurses, but medical assistants should never represent themselves as such. When making introductions or assisting with patients, the student medical assistant should state, "I am Sarda Ramirez, Dr. Patrick's medical assistant extern," or "I am Sandra, a medical assistant intern here in Dr. Patrick's office." These words accurately portray the duties performed and let patients know who is caring for them in the physician's office.

Externs need to know a few other rules. A medical assisting student must never attempt to form a romantic relationship with patients or co-workers on the externship site. Patient confidentiality must be respected at all times, therefore anything the student discovers about a patient must not be revealed or discussed under any circumstances. The student can never use any of the drug samples at the office unless specifically given permission by the physician. The student should not go to the drug storage area alone without permission or unless directed by the supervisor or physician. Externs should be extremely careful if asked to handle petty cash in the office. No student wants to be accused of any impropriety while performing externship hours. Students must never ask the physician to treat them or any members of their family or friends. If the physician offers this as a benefit, it is acceptable, but it must not be assumed that the physician is available for and willing to give free treatment. An extern must not ask the physician to provide prescriptions; for liability reasons, most physicians will not prescribe medications for people who are not their patients.

The extern should bring to the physician's office intangibles that are not found in any job description. Courtesy toward others, a capacity for teamwork, a positive attitude, enthusiasm, initiative, and dedication are important personal attributes for the professional medical assistant. After becoming comfortable with the expectations of the externship, the student should concentrate on developing his or her skills and learning as much as possible during this short period. An extern becomes a valuable team player by assisting others and by being reliable. By performing at peak level, the student gains the respect and trust of those on the externship site, and these people can serve as excellent references when the search begins for that first paid position. Remember, the professional services of a medical assistant are extremely personal. Therefore, the manner in which these services are performed can affect the health and welfare of a patient in either a positive or a negative way. When medical assisting students do their best to make sure all contact with patients is positive, they win the praise of patients, supervisors, and co-workers alike.

**Benefits of Externship**

- The school has a line of communication to the community and is better able to assess the needs and expectations of the public for which it is training prospective employees.
- The externship agency benefits from the new ideas and methods that the trainee may introduce. If the facility is looking for additional help, this is an ideal way to evaluate the performance of a trainee without involvement in the hiring process.
- The trainee benefits most of all by exposure to practical experience in a variety of settings. This experience in the real world removes a great deal of the anxiety that might otherwise be present in a first employment situation.

**Critical Thinking Application 3-4**

- If Sandra has any difficulty on her externship, whom should she contact?
- What should Sandra do when she has completed her normal duties for the day at the externship and it is not yet time to leave the clinic?
- How can Sandra glean more knowledge from her co-workers on the externship?

**Continuing Education**

Education does not end with the completion of formal training. The amount of medical knowledge gained in a given year is astounding. The practicing medical assistant must keep current with the rapid changes in the profession. Most physicians appreciate medical assistants who ask questions about unfamiliar conditions and procedures, and they are willing to teach students about the functioning of the body and treatments that benefit the patient. Much can be learned by reading or reviewing the medical literature that arrives in the daily mail or articles that appear in newspapers, magazines, and medically related newsletters.

Continuing education classes are available to enhance the knowledge of the professional medical assistant. Continuing education units (CEUs) may be required to maintain the medical assistant's certification. These credits can be obtained through many sources, including the AAMA, the American
Medical Technologists (AMT), and various other agencies and educational institutions. Professional seminars and workshops often offer CEUs. Notices of continuing education classes are sent in bulk to medical facilities and physicians’ offices, and the staff should watch for courses that pertain to their particular job duties and take advantage of them.

### PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

By joining a professional organization and taking part in the activities it offers, a medical assistant can grow personally and professionally, keeping abreast of current trends. Participation in a recognized professional organization shows that the employee takes his or her career seriously and wants to be an asset to the employer. National organizations, state chapters of these organizations, and local groups meet to promote the profession of medical assisting. The organizations offer many benefits to members. Some offer health, disability, and malpractice insurance programs. Some offer credit card options and discount programs that are exclusive to their membership. All extend an opportunity for continuing education and learning beyond the classroom. Some schools that offer medical assistant training form local or school-based chapters of professional organizations. Both the AAMA and AMT offer discounted student memberships.

#### CRITICAL THINKING APPLICATION 3-5
- When should Sandra get involved with professional organizations for medical assistants?
- How can she contribute to professional organizations in her area once she has graduated and secured a position as a medical assistant?
- Why is it important that Sandra participate in volunteer organizations?

### American Association of Medical Assistants and Certified Medical Assistants

The AAMA was organized formally in 1955 as a federation of several state associations that had been functioning independently. Today, the AAMA has 45 state societies and 250 local chapters. The organization, which has its national headquarters in Chicago, was the driving force behind the establishment of a national certification program for medical assistants. The AAMA also has been instrumental in the accreditation of medical assisting training programs in community colleges and private career institutes and in setting the minimum standards for entry-level medical assistants. At meetings held on national, state, and local levels, medical assistants can participate in workshops, learn about all types of advancement in the field, listen to prominent speakers, and network with other medical assistants from other parts of the country. The AAMA publishes a bimonthly journal, *CMA Today*, which includes articles with tests that may be submitted for CEU credit.

Since 1963, the AAMA has administered the Certified Medical Assistant (CMA) Examination. Those who pass the examination are awarded the CMA (AAMA) credential (Figure 3-5).

### American Medical Technologists and Registered Medical Assistants

Examinations are computerized and are offered continuously, year-round, at Prometric Testing and Assessment Centers throughout the United States. Certification is available to graduates of medical assisting programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) or by the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES). Recertification is required every 5 years and can be accomplished through CEUs or re-examination. Exam applications and additional information are available at www.aama-ntl.org.

### American Medical Technologists and Registered Medical Assistants

In the early 1970s, the AMT, a national certifying body for laboratory professionals, began offering a certifying examination for medical assistants. This led to the formation of the registered medical assistant (RMA) program within the AMT in 1976. The AMT offers this credential to medical assistants who meet established standards and pass the certifying examination (Figure 3-6). Several other certification examinations are offered by the AMT that may be of interest to medical assistants. The certified office laboratory technician (COLT) examination is available to those who have completed certain educational and work experience requirements. Most medical assistants who work in the clinical area and have at least 6 months of experience will qualify to take the examination. Medical assistants also may qualify to take the examination for certification as a registered phlebotomy technician (RPT), which is offered by the AMT, after meeting specific work-related requirements. The examination for Certified
Medical Administrative Specialist (CMAS) is offered to those who have graduated from an accredited administrative program or who have 5 years of experience in the field. RMAs with 2 years of administrative experience may also take the examination. All of these exams are computerized and can be taken at Pearson VUE centers throughout the United States. More information about the RMA examination is available at www.amtl1.com.

The AMT provides societal benefits, including publications such as AMT Events, a quarterly magazine with useful information and articles relating to the professions served by the organization. The AMT also offers national, state, and local meetings to enhance the knowledge and networking opportunities of its members. CEU credits are available to help increase a medical assistant's level of competence and are a requirement for those who first became certified (or will recertify) after January 1, 2006. (For more information on the AMT, visit the Evolve site at evolve.elsevier.com/kinm).

National Healthcareer Association

Some schools also offer certification through the National Healthcareer Association. These include the Certified Medical Administrative Assistant (CMAA), the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA), the Certified Billing and Coding Specialist (CBCS), and the Certified Medical Transcriptionist (CMT). The costs for these certification examinations range from approximately $100 to $150. The National Healthcareer Association's Web site is www.nhanow.com.

Taking Certification Examinations

Both the CMA and RMA certifications are national credentials. The CMA credential is offered by the AAMA, and the RMA credential is offered by the AMT. Because medical assistants are not required to be licensed, both of these examinations are voluntary. A medical assistant may practice in the United States without either certification, but most employers today require at least one certification. Both organizations have committees that develop the examinations, and they are both based on the roles that medical assistants fulfill in the workplace.

Students should take the examination soon after graduation; the intricate knowledge gained in school will be easier to recall the sooner the exam is taken. In addition, the fee for the CMA examination goes up 1 year after the graduation date. Although the graduate is not guaranteed higher wages with certification or registration, most employers are willing to pay more for a graduate who has been through formal training and the certification or registration procedure.

The CMA examination covers three general categories, including administrative, clinical, and transdisciplinary competencies. The examination is scored by tallying correct responses; therefore making a guess does not count against the student. The minimum score to obtain the CMA credential currently is 425, and students are allowed 3 hours to complete the examination. Once the student has been approved to take the exam, the AAMA sends a testing center scheduling permit to the candidate, who then schedules the exam. The test can be scheduled at the candidate's convenience within a 90-day assigned period of the student's choice. The AAMA offers two practice tests on its Web site that cover both anatomy and physiology and medical terminology review. The AAMA requires either continuing education credits or re-examination to maintain the CMA credential.

The RMA examination can be scheduled nearly every day of the year other than Sundays and holidays at more than 200 testing centers throughout the United States, its territories, and Canada. Applicants for the RMA examination must be graduates of a medical assisting course accredited by ABHES or CAAHEP, or they must meet requirements related to their experience. The RMA examination covers administrative skills, clinical skills, and general skills and comprises more than 200 questions. Examinees are allowed 3 hours to take the test. Scoring is based on a scale, and the minimum passing score is 70. Practice examinations are available on the AMT Web site.

The AMT recently mandated a point system to prove compliance with continuing education requirements. RMAs, CMAs, and COLTs are required to earn 30 points, and RPTs are required to earn 20 points. Points can be earned through continuing education, employer evaluations, professional and formal education, and various other methods.

MEDICAL ASSISTANT'S CREED

I believe in the principles and purposes of the profession of medical assisting.
I endeavor to be more effective.
I aspire to render greater service.
I protect the confidence entrusted to me.
I am dedicated to the care and well-being of all patients.
I am loyal to my physician-employer.
I am true to the ethics of my profession.
I am strengthened by compassion, courage, and faith.

The Difference Between CMAs and RMAs

The two major differences between the CMA and RMA credentials are the examination consultant organizations and the cost.

The current CMA examination fee is $125 for recent CAAHEP or ABHES graduates. Nonmembers must pay $250 to take the CMA examination. The annual membership fees vary from state to state and are substantially lower if one joins while still a student. Student membership costs range from $20 to approximately $35, but the student must apply for membership before graduating. Annual dues thereafter are $67 to $97, depending on the state association. The RMA examination fee is $95, which includes the first year's dues. Annual dues thereafter currently are $48. Table 3-1 presents a detailed comparison of the CMA and RMA.

CRITICAL THINKING APPLICATION 3-6

- Why is it important for Sandra to obtain one of the medical assisting certifications after graduation?
- How might certification help her career as a medical assistant?
- When and where can the tests be taken in your area?
| **TABLE 3-1 Differences between the Certified Medical Assistant and the Registered Medical Assistant** |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| **CERTIFIED MEDICAL ASSISTANT (CMA)** | **REGISTERED MEDICAL ASSISTANT (RMA)** |
| Credential awarded by | American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) | American Medical Technologists (AMT) |
| Address of certification or registration organization | American Association of Medical Assistants | American Medical Technologists |
| 20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 1575, Chicago, IL 60606-2903 | 10700 West Higgins Road, Suite 150, Rosemont, IL 60018 | 800-275-1268 |
| 800-228-2262 | 847-823-5169 | www.amtl.com |
| Organization Web site | www.aama-ntl.org | RMA Certification/AMT |
| Mailing address for | AAMA Certification | 10700 West Higgins Road, Suite 150, Rosemont, IL 60018 |
| certification applications | 7999 Eagle Way, Chicago, IL 60678-1079 | Federal licensing is not required; certification or registration is optional in most states. |
| Requirement for certification or registration | Federal licensing is not required; certification or registration is optional in most states. | Good moral character and at least 18 years old |
| Qualifications to take examination | Applicants must fall into one of three categories to qualify to take the CMA examination: | High school graduate or acceptable equivalent |
| | • Category One: Graduating student or recent graduate of a medical assisting program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAHEP) or the Accrediting | Must be a graduate of or scheduled to graduate from: |
| | Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES) | • A medical assistant program accredited by either ABHES or CAHEP |
| | • Category Two: Nonrecent graduate of a medical assisting program accredited by CAAHEP or ABHES | • A medical assistant program in a postsecondary school that is accredited by a regional or national organization, is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, and includes a minimum of 720 clock hours including externship |
| | • Category Three: Recertificant | • A formal medical services training of the U.S. Armed Forces |
| Examination approval organization | National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) | Must have 5 years of work experience unless graduated from the medical assisting program within the last 3 years |
| Cost of examination | AAMA members pay $125 (can be a student member, which costs $25 to $35, depending on the state); nonmembers pay $250 | $95 (membership in AMT not required) |
| Length of time required to take examination | 3 hours | 3 hours |
| Content of examination | 200 computerized questions covering general or transdisciplinary skills, clinical skills, and administrative skills | More than 200 computerized questions covering general subject areas, clinical areas, and administrative areas |
| Testing sites | More than 200 centers throughout the United States, assigned when approved to take examination. List of sites available at www.prometric.com. | More than 200 centers throughout the United States; list of sites available at www.pearsonvue.com/amt |
| Where to obtain practice test | www.aama-ntl.org/becomeCMA/exam_outline.aspx | Order from AMT website at www.amtl.com |
| Testing dates | Apply for a 90-day window, then schedule the exam within that window at a convenient date and time. Testing dates are ongoing and are arranged at Prometric Testing and Assessment Centers throughout the United States. | Testing dates are ongoing and are arranged at Pearson VUE Centers throughout the United States. |
CLOSING COMMENTS

This chapter has presented the advantages of becoming a trained medical assistant and some of the many career opportunities available. The necessary skills that must be developed and the general knowledge that must be acquired to function effectively have been presented. However, skills and knowledge alone do not ensure success. Personality traits and professional appearance are also critical. Professional societies and continuing education are vital to the professional medical assistant. The individual who accepts this career must be willing to accept the responsibilities inherent in its standards. The importance of gaining a national certification cannot be stressed enough.

Patient Education

Medical assistants may find it necessary to educate the patient about their scope of practice. Patients often assume that those assisting in the office are nurses, but medical assistants should never present themselves in this manner. When making introductions, the medical assistant should state, "I am Sandra Ramirez, Dr. Patrick’s medical assistant." These words accurately portray the MA’s role and help the patient identify who is who in the physician’s office.

Medical assisting has grown into one of the most respected professions in the allied health field. When asked, share information about the role that a medical assistant plays in the office and the training involved that prepares the MA for work duties.

Legal and Ethical Issues

In the course of a medical assistant’s daily work, a vast amount of personal and intimate knowledge will surface about the patients who entrust their care to the physician and those employed by the practice. Such information must be held in strict confidence and must never be discussed or relayed to others, including professional associates, unless the lack of knowledge will affect the patient's care in a negative way.

On an externship, a medical assisting student should expect to observe all the office protocols of regular attendance, punctuality, and dress code. The extern should hold the rules and regulations of the office in high regard and not expect special treatment. Never expect or ask for payment for serving as an extern, because this is a part of the school curriculum.

During the externship practice, medical assisting externs should restrict practice to areas in which they have been trained. Know the boundaries within which medical assistants are expected to perform and do not exceed them. Some medical assistants carry their own personal malpractice or medical liability insurance policies, and extern students may be covered under a blanket policy held by their school. Remember, if ever in doubt about what is acceptable during the externship, or even in actual practice as a medical assistant, ask the physician or supervisor.

SUMMARY OF SCENARIO

Sandra has chosen to embark on an exciting career and will find her work rewarding. She knows that she will be proud of her efforts and looks forward to becoming a respected member of the healthcare team in a physician’s office. She has set goals for her class work and attendance and is determined to meet them. Obstacles usually arise whenever one embarks on a new project, and Sandra must plan for the days she or her child may be ill or her transportation fails. She should have a backup plan in place to help her overcome minor setbacks.

Many opportunities exist for the medical assistant in both administrative and clinical positions, and as Sandra progresses through her training, she will find areas that appeal to her more than others. All are vitally important so that she will be a versatile medical assistant, able to perform front- and back-office duties. Exposure to various duties will be provided during the externship, and these experiences will help her determine where she might enjoy working once she graduates. It is important that Sandra glean as much experience and knowledge as possible while in school so that she will have more options after her training.

Sandra should develop a good relationship with her instructors and go to them when she has questions or concerns. Those professionals are anxious to share their knowledge and experience with students to best prepare them for the work environment. If Sandra’s grades ever drop or if she is struggling, she should seek the advice of the instructor to determine how to improve her performance. The externship also is crucial, because it usually is the first medical reference a new graduate will have. Any difficulties at the externship site should be brought to the attention of the externship supervisor or an instructor at her school. Learning to set goals will help her achieve more throughout her education, and this is a habit she should carry into her career.

With so many benefits available at different facilities in the medical field, Sandra must carefully weigh what she needs for herself and her son before taking any position. She should look at all of her options and choose the best one after careful evaluation. Her time in school should be spent getting to know her instructors and understanding their expectations, studying hard, learning to budget time and money, and discovering as much as possible about her new career. This will result in satisfaction with her job and new career.

SUMMARY OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define, spell, and pronounce the terms listed in the vocabulary.
   Spelling and pronouncing medical terms correctly bolster the medical assistant’s credibility. Knowing the definition of these terms promotes confidence in communication with patients and co-workers.

2. Briefly discuss the history of medical assisting as a profession.
   The first medical assistants probably were neighbors and friends of the physician. The field has grown into one of the most respected and versatile professions in allied health.
3. Differentiate between administrative and clinical medical assisting duties and have knowledge of the general responsibilities of the medical assistant.

Administrative duties involve running the office, such as scheduling appointments and filing insurance claims. Administrative medical assistants usually spend most of the day in the front office of the facility. Clinical duties include more patient contact and assisting the physician in the back office. New graduates often move toward one or the other division, but they should always be ready and willing to adapt to new duties or fill in at other areas when necessary.

4. Discuss the versatility of a career in medical assisting.

Medical assistants are versatile enough to work in many different settings. Most often they are found in physician offices, but they also work in hospitals, insurance companies, clinics, laboratories, and many other facilities. The combination of administrative and clinical training makes the medical assistant quite valuable to the employer.

5. Comprehend the current employment outlook for the medical assistant.

According to the Department of Labor, the medical assisting field is projected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations, with a 35% expected growth from 2006 to 2016. The projected employment for 2016 is 565,000 medical assistants.

6. Give the reasons that hiring an individual with no formal training often is more expensive than hiring a professional medical assistant.

Medical assistants who have been formally trained certainly deserve a fair wage, comparable to the national average for a person in whatever position they hold. When supervisors or employers attempt to find "bargain help" at a cheaper rate, they often do not hire the high-quality employee who is so necessary in the physician’s office. Because medical assistants help care for the patient, they should be compensated well so that the retention of the office staff will be continuous and stable. This can only help the physician care for patients in a more effective manner and gives the patients a sense of familiarity and security as well.

7. Identify several considerations to keep in mind, other than financial compensation, when choosing a position as a medical assistant.

The medical assistant should consider many factors other than the salary when choosing a position. Location, perks, benefits, and the atmosphere of the office are all important. Many assistants are interested in growth within the organization and welcome those opportunities. Working for a friendly, caring physician and/or supervisor is invaluable. Sometimes, taking a lesser position in a well-known and reputable facility is temporarily worth a lower wage because of future opportunities. Consider all aspects of a position before accepting a job offer.

8. Discuss the aspects of the medical assistant’s performance on a successful externship.

The medical assisting externship offers the student an opportunity to put the skills learned in the classroom to good use. If completed successfully, this is an excellent reference for the resume. The student should perform at the optimal level and never hesitate to complete duties assigned. Offer to go above and beyond to secure the support of the externship site as the job search begins.

9. List three unacceptable behaviors on the externship site.

- A student medical assistant extern should never attempt to form relationships with patients outside the office or view the chart for personal information. Do not ask the physician to treat family members, and do not take medications without explicit permission from the physician or supervisor. Be very careful when handling cash and drugs in the office.
- The student should make every effort never to be late to the externship site unless a true emergency occurs.

10. Explain why continuing education is so important to the medical assistant.

Continuing education is important to medical assistants so that they learn the latest trends and information and understand how to use them. Take advantage of local seminars and continuing education classes. Often the employer will agree to pay for classes or seminars that the medical assistant takes if they relate to his or her employment at the facility. Some will provide tuition reimbursement for college expenses, often even if the college courses are not related to the position the employee holds at the facility.

11. Understand medical assistant credentialing requirements, the importance of credentialing, and the process of obtaining credentialing.

Most physicians prefer a credentialed medical assistant when making hiring decisions. Information about the credentialing process is available from the AAMA and AMT websites, as well as from other certifying organizations.

12. Discuss the difference between a CMA and an RMA.

The main difference between the CMA and RMA credentials is the agency that provides the certification. The CMA credential is awarded by the AAMA, and the RMA is awarded by the AMI. Both are nationally recognized certifications.

**CONNECTIONS**

- **Study Guide Connection:** Go to the Chapter 3 Study Guide. Read and complete the activities.

- **Evolve Connection:** Go to the Chapter 3 link at [evolve.elsevier.com](http://evolve.elsevier.com) to complete the Chapter Review and Chapter Quiz. Pursue other resources listed for this chapter to increase your knowledge of The Medical Assisting Profession.