



# NEWS CAPSULE

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## Elevating the Level of Patient Care Through the Use of Medical Assistants

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either a full time/part time or a temporary basis.

To address why medical assistants are in such high demand, it might first help put the issue into perspective by acknowledging that the U.S. Department of Labor has identified medical assistants as their fastest growing job category. So, as my own physician is fond of saying, "let's take a look."

We can all agree there is a nursing shortage now, and it will only be a couple of years until the first of the baby boomers start to retire. There are simply not enough nurses, and it's only going to get worse. But wait, the good news is that many of the tasks that might be performed by a nurse don't need to be. Although medical assistants cannot make independent medical evaluations or provide medical advice, under the supervision of a physician or a nurse the tasks that medical assistants may perform have made them an invaluable resource.

In fact, medical assistants, when properly utilized, actually serve to elevate the level of patient care. This occurs

when charging medical assistants with routine tasks frees up physicians to see more patients, which is a quantitative advantage, and to get more done during the visit, which is a qualitative benefit. Although medical assistants cannot entirely substitute for nurses, they can provide a cost effective alternative to

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nurses when it comes to certain tasks. Simply put, medical assistants are less expensive than nurses, and those savings may be passed on to other areas of your practice.

Let's examine what types of tasks medical assistants may actually perform under the supervision of a physician or nurse. It's important to bear in mind their duties can either be clinical or administrative, or some combination of both.

In a large medical office, the medical assistant is much more likely to be specialized and to perform basic medical duties. For instance, medical assistants often draw blood, take EKGs, and take medical histories and record weight, pulse rate, blood pressure and other vital signs. They might sterilize instruments, arrange equipment, and collect and prepare lab specimens.

In a small practice, the medical assistant will quite often perform the routine medical tasks described above, but will also have administrative duties as well. In these settings medical assistants will often run the front desk. They might answer the phone, schedule appointments, handle the insurance forms, and escort patients to the exam rooms.

When these tasks are delegated to a medical assistant to be performed under the supervision of a physician or nurse, the patient benefits from the full attention of the physician or nurse on more significant matters. And again, the savings

that result from the utilization of medical assistants can be passed on to the more pressing needs of the practice.

Many of the practice managers, physicians, and hospital managers that we work with view medical assistants as indispensable partners on their team. Perhaps they might provide some value to you as well.

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