

The AAMA partners with the University of Nevada, Reno, to prevent FASDs



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This article was co-authored by Nancy A. Roget, MS, MFT, LADC, Mountain Plains FASD PIC principal investigator and project director. Content was adapted from a 2015 press release.

As part of a coordinated national effort to prevent fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs), the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) and the Mountain Plains FASD Practice and Implementation Center (Mountain Plains PIC), located at the Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (CASAT) at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), have initiated a collaborative effort to prepare medical assistants to reduce alcohol-exposed pregnancies and intervene with patients who engage in risky or hazardous alcohol use. The AAMA/Mountain Plains PIC partnership is supported by grant funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Prenatal alcohol exposure is a leading preventable cause of birth defects and developmental disabilities. The term *FASDs* is used to define the range of physical, mental, behavioral, and learning disabilities that can result from prenatal alcohol exposure. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders are completely preventable if a woman does not drink alcohol during pregnancy.

The Mountain Plains PIC works with national medical societies, professional organizations, and other CDC-funded, university-based PICs to develop, deliver, disseminate, and evaluate FASD training and practice implementation programs for medical professionals. The goal of the Mountain Plains PIC program is to enhance awareness and change practice behaviors of medical assistants with regard to providing alcohol

screening and brief interventions to patients to reduce risky and hazardous alcohol use. The AAMA will help the Mountain Plains PIC achieve these goals by contributing to the development and dissemination of training materials and practice resources.

Speaking about the decision to partner with the AAMA, Mountain Plains PIC Principal Investigator and Project Director Nancy A. Roget, MS, MFT, LADC, says, “The AAMA was chosen as the designated national partner for the Mountain Plains PIC because they are the leading certifying and [continuing education] body for medical assistants in the United States, with over 82,000 CMAs (AAMA). This innovative partnership will result in better preparation for medical assistants to routinely screen for and intervene with women and men who engage in unhealthy alcohol use.”

Screening and intervention for patients drinking alcohol at unhealthy levels is more effective when medical assistants are utilized as part of the health care team, especially with the skills and knowledge medical assistants have in providing patient education and interventions.¹ Medical assistants can play a key role in screening for unhealthy alcohol use due to the nature of their responsibilities as active members of the health care team:

- Frequent interaction with patients
- Role as liaison between patient and provider
- Familiarity with electronic medical records and patient health history

- Ability to connect with patients culturally and linguistically^{2,3}
- Scope of practice that allows them to be trained as health coaches, provide counseling and education to reinforce physician advice, and follow up with the patient⁴

Research has shown that using medical assistants to screen for alcohol use is more effective than provider-only care models, especially in areas where physician and other clinician shortages exist. Since physicians often lack time for alcohol screening and brief intervention, redistributing these tasks to medical assistants saves providers’ time, which in turn benefits patients.⁴ To maximize efficiency, medical assistants can conduct screening as part of the routine patient intake, thereby increasing the chance of identifying risky drinking in patient populations.⁵ Making the provider aware of a patient’s positive screening results facilitates follow-up and can improve integrated preventive care in health care teams.

Medical assistants also respond to the Affordable Care Act–driven need for patient-centered care teams and, as health care reform continues to shift the focus of care from acute services to primary prevention, medical assistants will play a crucial role in extending preventive services and enhancing interdisciplinary teams that rely on nonphysicians to meet patients’ needs.

The partnership will demonstrate medical assistants’ valuable role in advancing the

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To learn more about the organizations and programs discussed in this article, refer to the following resources:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** Visit www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/training.html or call 800/232-4636.
- **Mountain Plains FASD PIC:** Visit <https://casat.org> or call 866/617-2816.

goals of this national health initiative, says AAMA Chief Executive Officer and Legal Counsel Donald A. Balasa, JD, MBA. “CMAs (AAMA) are the key communication links between patients and providers, and are uniquely positioned to motivate patients to avoid or stop dangerous alcohol consumption. The AAMA is fully committed to this initiative, and is honored to partner with Mountain Plains PIC and the CDC to combat FASDs,” says Balasa.

Funding for the AAMA partnership with the Mountain Plains PIC began September 30, 2015, and both organizations look forward to an impactful collaboration to reduce FASDs. ♦

Questions? Contact Donald A. Balasa, JD, MBA, at dbalasa@aama-ntl.org, or call the AAMA at 800/228-2262.

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