

JOB PROFILE

Consider a Career as a Medical Assistant

(NAPS)—The last time you visited a physician's office, you may have encountered a medical assistant. Perhaps it was the person who scheduled your appointment or who greeted you when you checked in. It could have been the person who escorted you to the exam room to ask routine health questions or to record your vital signs. A medical assistant may have helped you understand an item on your physician's bill or called in a prescription to your pharmacist.

Those who enter the medical assisting profession enjoy contact with patients, experience a wide variety of responsibilities, and thrive in the fast-paced environment of a medical practice or clinic. Medical assistants also benefit from job security due to a growing and aging population. They perform a wide array of clinical and administrative duties with physicians of all specialties, including family practitioners, pediatricians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and optometrists, among others. Most medical assistants work a regular 40-hour work week—some work part time, evenings, or weekends.

Responsibilities vary depending on office location, size, and specialty. In small practices, medical assistants usually perform both clinical and administrative functions, reporting to an office manager, physician, or other health practitioner. In larger health care settings, medical assistants may specialize in one specific area, such as billing (administrative only) or clinical procedures (which may vary by state law).

Medical assistants answer telephones; greet patients; update and file patient medical records; fill out insurance forms; schedule appointments; arrange for hospital admissions and laboratory services; and handle correspondence, transcribing, and bookkeeping. They

QUICK FACTS

According to the American Association of Medical Assistants, by embarking on a career as a medical assistant, you will be:

- *In Demand:* Medical assisting is one of the fastest growing professions in the U.S. Each year, more than 7,000 candidates earn the CMA (AAMA) credential.
- *Paid Competitively:* Medical assistants earn \$20,810–\$40,190 per year depending on location and experience, based on a 2010 report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The median salary for medical assistants is \$28,860 with some medical assistants earning up to \$19.32 per hour.
- *Helping Others:* Medical assistants work side by side with physicians and other skilled practitioners making a difference in the lives of the patients they serve.

may take medical histories, explain treatment procedures to patients, prepare patients for examination, and assist the physician throughout the exam. Medical assistants also collect and prepare laboratory specimens or perform basic laboratory tests. They instruct patients about medications and special diets, prepare and administer medications as directed by a physician, authorize drug refills as directed, draw blood,

prepare patients for X-rays, take electrocardiograms, remove sutures, and change dressings.

Most employers prefer to hire graduates of formal programs in medical assisting. Such programs are offered in postsecondary vocational schools, community and junior colleges, and in colleges and universities. Postsecondary programs usually last either one year, resulting in a certificate or diploma, or two years, resulting in an associate degree. Courses cover anatomy, physiology, and medical technology, as well as computer applications, transcription, record keeping, accounting, and insurance processing. Students learn laboratory techniques, clinical and diagnostic procedures, pharmaceutical principles, medication administration, and first aid. In addition, medical assisting students study office practices, patient relations, and medical law and ethics.

Earning the CMA (AAMA) credential is one way a medical assistant can demonstrate knowledge in the field and commitment to professionalism. Those who graduate from a program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) or the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES) are eligible to sit for the national CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination by the Certifying Board of the American Association of Medical Assistants. Like other professional designations, the CMA (AAMA) is evidence of competence in a demanding field.

To learn more or to find an accredited medical assisting program in your area, contact the American Association of Medical Assistants at 800/228-2262 or visit the AAMA website at www.aama-ntl.org.