

Certification and Licensure

Facts you should know

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Just as understanding terminology is important in medicine, having a working knowledge of the language of professional credentialing is most helpful for medical assistants. To simplify matters, this article will focus on the differences between licensure and certification.

I

Licensure may be defined as a mandatory credentialing process established by a government entity, usually at the state level. If a profession is licensed, it is illegal for an individual to practice the profession without a license. The requirements and procedures for obtaining a license may vary from state to state. Therefore, unless some sort of reciprocity agreement has been forged between states, it may not be easy for a professional licensed in one state to obtain a license in another state.

On the other hand, certification may be defined as a voluntary credentialing process—usually national in its scope and most often sponsored by a nongovernmental, private-sector entity. Because of its voluntary nature, an individual need not be certified in order to practice a profession.

It should be apparent from these definitions that it is inappropriate to use the expressions “voluntary licensure” or “mandatory certification.” If the license is voluntary, it is not, strictly speaking, a license. Similarly, if the certification is mandatory, it is really licensure.

Some states have incorporated a national certification into their licensure programs. Such an arrangement, however, does not

render the certification itself mandatory, but merely makes it a prerequisite to obtaining licensure in that state.

Other states have started their own certification programs. Unlike licensure, state certification is not required to practice, but provides information to consumers about the educational and competency-verifying attainments of the certificate.

With these simple definitions in place, it is now possible to see how the terms certification and licensure are used in regard to medical assisting.

II

The CMA (AAMA) credential represents a medical assistant who has been certified by the Certifying Board of the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA). The CMA (AAMA) fulfills the definition of certification given above in that it is:

- ◆ voluntary
- ◆ national
- ◆ sponsored by a nongovernmental, private-sector body

A significant strength of the CMA (AAMA) Certification/Recertification Examination is that its content is based on a scientifically-grounded occupational analysis.

At present, no state has instituted general licensure for medical assistants. Some states, though, do have mandatory educational and/or experiential requirements for a very limited number of duties (e.g., radiography, venipuncture, and injections). A mandatory credential addressing a narrow area of a profession’s activity is sometimes called a “permit” to distinguish it from traditional licensure, which encompasses all or most of the profession’s scope of practice.

Should medical assisting seek licensure for itself, as so many other allied health professions have done? This question was addressed in the “Position Statement on Certification, Licensure and Registration” discussed and adopted by the 1985 House of Delegates of the AAMA. The Position Statement argued against pursuing licensure and advocated an intensified effort to encourage and convince physicians to hire the CMA (AAMA). The Position Statement concluded that:

AAMA should remain a professional association promoting voluntary certification [for medical assistants]. Certification offers status and definition to the practitioner; provides a means of establishing a national standard of care with regard to the legal duty of the medical assistant to the patient; offers the employer guidelines for hiring qualified staff, as well as a pool of applicants; provides an environment for continuing education to take place for medical assistants; and is cost-effective.

III

Credentialing will continue to be a vital issue in allied health circles. Keeping in mind the basic definitions of licensure and certification—despite a confusing array of similar terms—will foster a better understanding of the impact of credentialing on the medical assisting profession.



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CMA (AAMA) and RMA credentialing CAAHEP and ABHES accreditation

What are the differences?

Many of us feel at a loss in understanding the differences between CMA (AAMA) and RMA credentialing and between CAAHEP and ABHES accreditation. The following may alleviate the misunderstandings that commonly occur.

CMA (AAMA) and RMA credentialing

The CMA (AAMA) represents a medical assistant who has been certified by the Certifying Board of the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA). The RMA is given by another organization, the American Medical Technologists. The CMA (AAMA) and Registered Medical Assistant (RMA) are both voluntary, national credentials for the medical assisting profession.

With exceptions in a few states, both credentials are *voluntary* in that neither the federal government nor most states require a medical assistant to be either certified or registered in order to practice medical assisting. Both credentials are *national* in that both the CMA (AAMA) and the RMA tests are given throughout the United States.

The CMA (AAMA) Certification/Recertification Examination is based on a scientifically grounded occupational analysis. This means that the CMA (AAMA) Exam is testing what medical assistants are actually doing on their jobs. The CMA (AAMA) is required to recertify the credential every five years, either by continuing education or examination, to keep the CMA (AAMA) current. Every CMA (AAMA) employed or seeking employment must be currently certified in order to use the CMA (AAMA) credential in connection with employment.

The National Board of Medical Examiners, which administers several medical specialty examinations, serves as test consultant for the CMA (AAMA) Exam.

CAAHEP and ABHES accreditation

There are two national entities that accredit medical assisting educational programs:

- 1) **The Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP).** In collaboration with the Medical Assisting Education Review Board, CAAHEP accredits medical assisting programs in both public and private postsecondary institutions throughout the United States that prepare individuals for entry into the medical assisting profession.
- 2) **Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools.** The Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES) accredits postsecondary institutions and programs preparing individuals for entry into the medical assisting profession.

Other national, regional, and state agencies accredit institutions that may have medical assisting programs, but do not accredit specifically the medical assisting program in the institution.

With exceptions in a few states, graduation from an accredited program is voluntary in that neither the federal government nor most states require a medical assistant to be formally educated to be employed as a medical assistant. However, graduation from an accredited program benefits students by providing the following:

- 1) proof of completing a program that meets nationally accepted standards
- 2) recognition of their education by their professional peers
- 3) eligibility for professional credentialing, such as AAMA certification or AMT registration

Graduates of medical assisting programs accredited by CAAHEP or ABHES are immediately eligible to take the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination. Examinees who pass this exam are designated as CMAs (AAMA).

Graduates from CAAHEP or ABHES accredited medical assisting programs are also immediately eligible to take the RMA Exam offered by the American Medical Technologists (AMT). Examinees who pass this examination are designated as Registered Medical Assistants (RMAs).

Both CAAHEP and ABHES publish a list of their accredited programs.

For more information...

On the CMA (AAMA) and CAAHEP programs:

American Association of Medical Assistants
20 N. Wacker Dr., Ste. 1575
Chicago, IL 60606
Phone: 800/228-2262
Website: www.aama-ntl.org

On ABHES programs:

Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
803 W. Broad St., Ste. 730
Falls Church, VA 22046
Phone: 703/533-2082
Website: www.abhes.org

On the RMA credential:

Registered Medical Assistants of American Medical Technologists
10700 W. Higgins Rd., Ste. 150
Rosemont, IL 60018
Phone: 800/275-1268
Website: www.amt1.com