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Lifelong



By Cathy Cassata

The rapidly changing nature of health care comes with many uncertainties. And as new regulations, research developments, and technologies emerge at a rapid pace, health care professionals must keep their knowledge current through continuing education (CE).

“[Continuing education] isn’t just [needed for] hot-button topics like reproductive care that are changing rapidly due to regulations; it is also [for] how we treat common conditions like hypertension, dia-

betes, and obesity,” says Ben Reinking, MD, pediatrician and development coach.

As advancements reshape how health care providers practice, patients are also becoming more informed—and sometimes misinformed—through internet searches and artificial intelligence (AI) tools.¹

Helping patients make sense of the overwhelming amount of information they have at their fingertips is more crucial than ever for health care professionals, notes Dr. Reinking. For instance, nearly 9 out of 10 adults in the United States struggle with health literacy, according to the Center for

Health Care Strategies.²

Keeping up with their own medical knowledge is one way health care providers can ease the burden. “Staying current isn’t a luxury; it’s a necessity,” says Dr. Reinking. “It ensures that we’re giving patients the best care possible and helping them navigate this new information landscape with clarity, empathy, and trust.”

PAGE THROUGH PRO PERKS

While complying with requirements for keeping credentials current, health care



CONTINUED ...

Learning Bolsters Your Education and Career

professionals who complete CE earn other professional benefits:

CE improves your patient care. For Shannon Richardson, CMA (AAMA), who has been a medical assistant for 30 years, keeping up with CE helps her connect with patients.

“As a medical assistant, you’re often the first point of contact for patients, and your knowledge, confidence, and demeanor directly affect their experience,” she says. “CE empowers you to stay sharp, adapt to change, and bring your best self to every patient interaction.”

Nick Mickowski, director of continuing education and membership at the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA), shares specific examples of how knowledge can help support better patient outcomes. First, he points to the issue of human trafficking. Up to 88% of trafficking victims access health care during trafficking situations, yet not all health care professionals know how best to help them.³ “A medical assistant who has completed training on human trafficking prevalence, indicators, patterns, and resources for those experiencing human trafficking will be better suited to recognize

and assist such victims in the health care setting,” says Mickowski.

Another example involves pediatric patients with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who arrive for a routine checkup. Research shows that youth living with ASD are less likely to receive preventive services such as vaccinations, even though they see their providers often.⁴ A medical assistant who has completed CE on the topic of ASD in children may be able to better support the patient’s visit and facilitate appropriate care, observes Mickowski. “The training could help the medical assistant have a better understand-



ing of communication and sensory-friendly strategies that ensure the patient is able to receive the best care possible,” he says.

CE makes you a more valuable employee. Engaging in continuing professional training or development may help workers to retain their current employment, according to a 2023 systematic review.⁵

During the 15 years that Jenny Wiedenhoft, CMA (AAMA), has worked as a medical assistant, she has learned that keeping up with CE makes her more valuable to employers. “If you can’t keep up with changes or refuse to learn to do new things, then you’re not going to be valuable to the company [that] hired you,” she says.

For example, CE can minimize the risk of negative outcomes in the health care setting, notes Mickowski. Consider training on cyberattacks, ransomware, and phishing scams. “As scammers get more sophisticated in their methods, health care professionals need to be aware of the types of scams that may seek to gain access to sensitive information,” he says. “A training on such methods can help medical assistants remain vigilant and avoid headaches and potential damages associated with a breach.”

Richardson recalls a colleague who completed CE about telehealth during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and was able to quickly transition into a virtual care role. “Because of this timely knowledge, they not only ensured continuity of care for patients but also became a resource for other staff learning the system—leading to a promotion to a telehealth coordinator role,” she says.

CE leads to advanced opportunities. Keeping up with her certification created new career opportunities for Wiedenhoft, including a role on a clin-

COVER CE REQUIREMENTS

CE requirements vary by certifying organization. For CMA (AAMA) certification, 60 CEUs are needed from the following categories:

- 10 administrative
- 10 clinical
- 10 general
- 30 from any combination of the above

“A maximum of 30 non-AAMA CEUs may be applied towards your recertification application. You can upload non-AAMA CEUs at any time during your certification period for review and approval,” says Nick Mickowski.

ic’s medical assisting advisory board as a contract employee to help students prepare for their practicums. This role led to her latest job as a medical assisting educator. “Most of the people who come into the medical assisting field and embrace it as a profession are lifelong learners,” she says. “Things do change, and keeping up can keep your mind young and improve your knowledge overall.”

Health care always offers room for growth, stresses Dr. Reinking. He finds that CE can help medical assistants gain the confidence to further their education and advance their careers.

“While those steps may seem big, they all begin with small, consistent investments in learning like continuing education,” he says.

CHARACTER ARCS

Aside from the professional benefits of CE, learning reaps personal benefits:

CE feeds the desire to learn. Learning about various topics can reignite the curiosity that initially sparked your interest

in medicine. “The excitement of learning something new and applying it to real-life care reminds us why we chose such a challenging profession,” says Dr. Reinking.

Learning about different topics can also lead you to a professional niche or passion that fulfills you personally. Perhaps you take a course on diabetes care coordination or the unique health care needs of older patients and decide to work in those

specialties. “Quality continuing education can expose you to new ideas and outlooks that will enrich your [experiences],” says Mickowski.

CE provides a break from the day-to-day. CE opportunities allow employees to step outside the daily grind. “It’s not a vacation, but it is a break and a chance to use your brain differently, reflect, and often meet like-minded professionals who share your passion,” says Dr. Reinking.

It can provide the chance to grow beyond clinical knowledge. “Medicine is a science and an art. At the end of the day, it’s about people,” says Dr. Reinking.

Communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and goal setting are essential soft skills that can help you thrive in your career in the long term. “They’re what make the difference between burnout and fulfillment, between surviving and truly flourishing in medicine. Seek out CE opportunities that strengthen not just what you know, but how you lead, connect, and grow,” advises Dr. Reinking.

CE boosts confidence and reduces stress. The vast majority (94%) of respondents to an Indeed poll reported that confidence is “important” or “very important” to completing daily work, and 94% also said it is a major contributor to overall career growth.⁶

When Richardson

READING UP

Each health care profession has different requirements for CE or continuing medical education (CME). To find state-specific requirements for various health care positions (e.g., physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, and registered nurses), visit the website of each state board governing each profession.

engages in CE, she feels more confident in her capabilities, which helps reduce stress. For instance, after completing a CE course on phlebotomy techniques and patient communication, she was able to perform blood draws more smoothly and calmly, especially for anxious patients. “Learning made me more effective. This not only improved the patient experience but also helped me feel more in control and less anxious during busy shifts,” she says.

Learning new skills like how to use an updated electronic health record system or gaining a deeper understanding of chronic disease management also makes Richardson’s everyday work more meaningful and less routine, “which can help prevent burnout and keep your passion for health care strong,” she says.

TEXTBOOK EXAMPLES

In April 2024, the AAMA launched an online tool to facilitate the submission of non-AAMA CEUs from CMAs (AAMA). You can upload non-AAMA CEUs at any time during your certification period for review and approval.

Since its launch, AAMA staff have reviewed thousands of non-AAMA CEU programs and gotten a crash course in the types of trainings medical assistants throughout the country are completing. Some common course topics include the following:

- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration
- Fraud, waste, and abuse
- Cybersecurity
- Bloodborne pathogens
- Infection control
- Communication
- Vaccines
- Human trafficking

“We see an incredible variety of courses, and it is always interesting to see courses that help allied health professionals to be more knowledgeable when working with underserved communities,” says Mickowski.

Examples include “HIV Care and Sexual Health Assessment for American Indian and Alaska Native Patients” and “Hepatitis B Health Disparities in Refugee and Immigrant Communities.”

“We also see courses on rare diseases and the rare disease community, which help shed light on a group that can be overlooked and undertreated in the health care delivery systems of today,” says Mickowski.

VOLUMES OF OPPORTUNITY

Note: All continuing education used for recertification of the CMA (AAMA) credential must follow the policies of the CMA (AAMA) Recertification by Continuing Education Application.

Below are some common ways to find CE opportunities.

- The AAMA’s “Find CEUs” webpage
- The AAMA Annual Conference
- AAMA state societies and local chapters
- Your employer
- Employer-sponsored training

Below are some unique avenues for obtaining CE:

- Webinars and podcasts that have been approved for CE credits
- Schools with medical assisting programs
- State departments of health trainings

“I got CEUs from a local school online. Many communities have a technical school, and you don’t have to be enrolled there to take their CE courses,” says Wiedenhoef. While the classes may not be specifically geared toward medical assistants, she says you can learn from other health care providers who are taking the courses.

She considered taking courses about commonly misused drugs such as opioids, fentanyl, and marijuana. “Most of my working atmosphere was in a specialty. Learning about something like pain management or opioid dependence can carry over into caring for patients who might be dealing with this,” says Wiedenhoef.

And because she lives in a Spanish-

speaking community, she took a Spanish class.

Before taking any CE, she suggests asking your employer if it qualifies as professional development: “Just because it’s free, doesn’t mean it’s a good thing to take.”

Spending your precious resources of time, energy, and money on CE is a worthwhile endeavor—as is being selective on which CE to pursue. And whatever CE you choose, you and any patients you encounter will benefit greatly. ✨

The CE test for this article can be found on page 29.



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