

Connect the Dots

Medical Assistants Transition from the Classroom to the Clinic

By Brian Justice

The first major hurdles of a medical assistant's career are usually cleared after a year or two. Settled into the routines, atmosphere, and pace of a satisfying job, medical assistants may begin to question what comes next. The next stage is one in which their experience, emotional intelligence, and professional development can make them invaluable in helping clinicians manage their practices and patients manage their health.¹

Learning as You Go

Medical assistants learn early on that patients' unpredictable behavior often upends their training's clearly defined protocols and scenarios and that emotional intelligence is as crucial as clinical accuracy.²

"In a real clinic, things happen in real time, and applying classroom knowledge to patients can be overwhelming but exciting," says Rita DeVaul, BA, CMA (AAMA), lead medical assistant in the orthopedics department at Detroit-based Henry Ford Health. "After learning that not every patient presents exactly as in textbooks, [we understand that] their complex histories or unexpected reactions require quick thinking, and that's a big transition, but medical assistants adapt

with hands-on experience."

"Patients aren't scripted," adds Amanda Spagnolo, MSN, RN, CNL, manager of medical group clinical education at Chicago-based Endeavor Health. "Medical assistants may have been thrown one or two curveballs in school, but a patient may throw them five. But they get used to it and apply what they learned in the classroom to real-life patients."

That includes developing sensitivity to tone and body language, learning to spot early signs of patient distress and adjusting communication styles accordingly, and recognizing that negative interactions may be rooted in fear or discomfort. Do not be discouraged though. Making patients feel seen, heard, and cared for fosters an emotional intuition that can establish trust and inspire calm from the earliest moments of an interaction.²

"When you truly listen to the reasons behind a patient's difficult behavior, you realize that ... often they are scared, tired, in pain, or just don't understand," says Abby Thomas, CMA (AAMA), a workers' compensation representative for Keystone RV in Milford, Indiana. "Don't take it personally. Remember that they're there for help."

Your Turn

The health care industry is constantly changing, and early-career medical assistants, however comfortable and confident they may be in their work, must also be adaptable. As the role evolves from support to active participation in delivering care, medical assistants will increasingly work as part of dynamic care teams. They must understand their own responsibilities and how their work fits into a larger, coordinated effort that includes physicians, nurses, and administrative staff.³

"The biggest surprise for some new hires was how hands-on the work here is, but as they become comfortable with the workflow, they gain confidence and enjoy being more involved in actively contributing to clinical care," says Lynn Le, CMA (AAMA), lead clinical assistant for the SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium in Juneau, Alaska. "We expect our medical assistants to perform everything within our scope of practice, including whatever our [physicians] are comfortable delegating. So, if you're not 100% confident in something, ask. It shows you care about doing it right."

Nevertheless, confidence is shaky within the American workplace. In fact, many workers report experiencing imposter syndrome, particularly in health care,⁴ and this issue

is more prevalent among women (about 35%) than men (about 30%).⁵ But medical assistants should not let self-doubt prevent them from realizing their potential.

“I thought I’d be great right away because of my grades, but I had to grow through real-time feedback and adjust my expectations,” remembers James Kelly, CMA (AAMA), a certified medical assistant at St. Luke’s in Blue Springs, Missouri. “I’m still learning. I still ask providers and nurses to walk me through medications or techniques I’m unsure of. Nobody judges you for caring enough to ask.”

Strategies for boosting workplace confidence include completing high-visibility assignments, seeking mentorship, and speaking up in meetings. More private and simple tactics include avoiding comparing yourself to others and practicing positive self-talk. Together, these actions can foster a confident approach to advancing one’s career path.⁵

“Stay open to new ideas and feedback, learn from mistakes, don’t be afraid to ask questions, and watch others. That’s how to grow in this career,” advises April Jones, CMA (AAMA), a medical assistant with MetroPartners OBGYN in Mendota Heights, Minnesota. “Just give yourself a little grace and understand that confidence takes time.”

A Multiplayer Experience

Almost half of health care workers (46%) reported feeling burned out in 2022, up from less than one-third (32%) in 2018.⁶ To fight that feeling, build strong connections with colleagues and set boundaries between personal emotions and clinical responsibilities.⁷

“There are going to be a lot of times

Leading by Learning

The only constant in health care is change. While medical assistants’ initial education provides the necessary foundation, these forms of ongoing development play a crucial role in maintaining high standards and advancing their careers:

Keep pace with knowledge. Staying up to date on medical terminology, medications, and advanced clinical practices enhances the ability to support physicians, communicate effectively with patients, and manage complex medical situations. It also helps ensure ongoing compliance with changing regulatory policies around safety and quality of care.⁸

Keep up with technology. Technology is advancing rapidly in all areas, particularly health care. Medical assistants who pursue ongoing education in digital tools and high-tech medical devices can be indispensable as technological literacy becomes increasingly essential; those who embrace it can adapt quickly to new systems as they are introduced.⁸

Keep track of opportunities. Training certifications in health care management, coding, or specialty care can qualify medical assistants for supervisory positions, more specialized clinical roles, and drive increased job satisfaction.⁸

When medical assistants are well-trained and up to date, it is evident in the care they provide for patients. Communicating clearly, anticipating needs, and supporting treatment plans all help build trust and create a better experience for patients. Ongoing education also helps medical assistants identify potential issues early, respond promptly, and maintain a safer and more supportive health care environment for everyone.

when managing difficult patients or tasks may be overwhelming,” says Heather Baltzer, ambulatory manager for the clinical education program at Jefferson Einstein Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “Expect the unexpected and approach those things with compassion and empathy, and classroom skills will continue to support you in the real-world environment.”

Ahead of the Game

Maintaining a sense of purpose in a demanding clinical setting is crucial for fostering meaningful interactions with employers, supervisors, colleagues, and patients. Appreciating the value of team success and positive outcomes will help sustain motivation in the face of heavy workloads and challenging schedules. Medical assistants whose early careers are established on solid ground are well-suited to assume ever-higher levels of responsibility and expand what is,

first and foremost, their primary goal: continually improving patient care. ♦

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