

# Free up to 3 hours of doctors' time daily with smart use of MAs

APR 23, 2021

**Len Strazewski**

Contributing News Writer

---

What would you do with three more hours each day? Trained medical assistants (MAs) integrated into your medical practice can free up to three hours of physicians' time daily—if they take on the right tasks.

Medical assistants are under-utilized in most medical practices, according to Marie Brown, MD, director of practice redesign at the AMA. Dr. Brown is a professor emeritus at Rush University and a practicing physician in internal medicine. She presented tips on recruitment and retention of medical assistants during a recent session that is part of the AMA STEPS Forward™ webinar series that focuses on physician well-being, practice redesign, and implementing telehealth during COVID-19.

The series also provides various toolkits that offer real-world solutions, success stories and downloadable resources that address common practice challenges.

Dr. Brown said many of the daily practice tasks that physicians perform do not require a physician's level of expertise, such as recordkeeping, medication review, pending routine orders and identifying care gaps. These can be performed by another member of the medical team, such as a medical assistant.

Properly assigned medical assistants can free up to three hours a day from a physician's schedule by taking some of the administrative and clinical tasks and allow a physician to focus more time on direct interaction with patients, she said.

## Maximizing use of MAs

However, making best use of medical assistants can pose some challenges. Staffing can be difficult, she noted. “There’s just not enough of them. The ideal staffing ratio may be two MAs to every one physician or clinician. But what I hear from around the country is there are not enough assistants to hire.”

Dr. Brown said in order to recruit and retain MAs, practice managers need to understand the various ways employees can become MAs, determine the best role for MAs in a certain practice, make a good business case for MAs in a practice, and then develop a plan to onboard and retain trained MAs.

While MAs generally do not need to be licensed or certified by law, their scope of work and state regulatory requirements vary from state to state and practice to practice. Types of certification include the certified medical assistant (CMA), registered medical assistant (RMA), and certified clinical medical assistant (CCMA).

Medical assistants can qualify in several ways to sit for a certifying exam.

- Apprenticeship, usually lasting five years (High school graduate with on-the-job training, with the physician attesting to their role).
- Formal MA training programs that take nine months to two years.
- Military training.
- Experience as an MA instructor.

## MA training as early as high school

“Some innovative programs have engaged local high schools so that some of the courses that they take, science or health in their junior or senior year can be applied to the work ... to shorten the two-year training,” Dr. Brown said.

Once hired and onboarded into the practice, the MA’s role varies from the basics of escorting patients into an exam room and taking some vitals (room and run), to a bigger team-based care role that includes broader administrative functions, in-room documentation support, in-basket and patient portal management and protocol-driven tasks.

MAs can be involved in pre-appointment agenda setting, documenting the chief complaint and history of present illness, reviewing medications and helping physicians in the exam room. Many MAs around the country—following protocols—help identify care gaps such as a need for a screening mammogram, routine blood tests such as hemoglobin A1c, and pend these orders.

It is important to match individual MA skills to tasks, because training and background varies so widely. Case studies indicate that practices using MAs saw time to provide care go down and patient

and physician satisfaction go up—along with revenue, Dr. Brown said.

When you have recruited, trained and integrated an MA into your practice, it is important to develop a plan for continuous professional development and a career progression ladder with different titles, levels and skill sets, she added.

Return on investment increases as MAs progress along a defined career development and job title path, she said. Titles can be simple stages such as MA I, II and III or more descriptive, such as team care coordinator and lead MA.