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# Medical Assistants Scope of Practice Clarified



Medical assistants are unlicensed individuals who, according to [Business and Professions Code section 2069](#), perform basic administrative, clerical and technical supportive services – usually in a physician’s office -- under the **direct** supervision of either a supervising physician or podiatrist, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or certified nurse-midwife.

The person in the supervising role must be physically present at the treatment facility when the medical assistant is performing routine medical tasks and procedures. Although the supervising physician may delegate – in writing – supervision of the medical assistant to a physician assistant, nurse practitioner or certified nurse-midwife, the physician is ultimately responsible for the patient’s treatment and care.

Medical assistants must be at least 18 years old. Before he or she can perform technical supportive services, the medical assistant must receive a certificate from the training institution or instructor indicating satisfactory completion of required training. A copy of the certificate must be retained by the employer of the medical assistant. The training may also be administered by a licensed physician or podiatrist, or by a registered nurse, licensed vocational nurse, a physician assistant or a “qualified medical assistant” certified by a certifying organization recognized by the Medical Board of California (Board) and holding appropriate credentials to teach medical assistants. Certification in writing showing all training received, the content and duration of the training, and that requisite competence was demonstrated by the medical assistant is required. The physician, podiatrist or instructor must sign and date the certification. The documented record of all training received must be maintained by the employer.

By law, a medical assistant may not be employed for inpatient care in a licensed general acute care hospital.

Judging from the number of questions received by the Board every day, there is confusion about exactly which tasks medical assistants are allowed to perform. The bottom line is that medical assistants may not diagnose, treat or perform any task that is invasive or requires an assessment. Additionally, the Board has said that it is illegal to use medical assistants to replace highly trained licensed professionals. Further, medical assistants are there to assist and perform support services in the physician’s office appropriate with their training, which cannot be compared with licensed nurses or other health professionals who must meet rigorous educational and examination requirements.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to create a comprehensive list; however, properly trained medical assistants who have demonstrated competence, and whose training and competence have been properly documented in their records by supervising physicians, may perform the following:

- Administer medication orally, sublingually, topically, vaginally or rectally, or by intramuscular, subcutaneous and intradermal injection (injections require additional training). Provide a single dose to the patient for immediate self-administration. In every case, the physician must verify the correct medication and dosage and authorize the administration. The physician must be physically present in the treatment facility when the drug is administered. The verification of medication can also be delegated to a podiatrist, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or registered nurse.
- Call in refills to a pharmacy under the direct supervision of the physician or podiatrist as long as refills are exact and have no changes in dosage or quantity. The refill must be documented in the patient’s chart as a standing order and be patient specific.
- Collect and record patient data such as temperature, blood pressure, pulse, respiration rate, height and weight, and basic information about presenting and previous conditions.
- Measure and describe skin test reaction and make a record in the patient’s chart. Every questionable

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test result should be immediately brought to the physician's attention. In addition, all results need to be reported to the appropriate provider.

- Perform electrocardiogram, electroencephalogram, or plethysmography tests, except full body plethysmography.
- Apply and remove bandages and dressings to superficial incisions or lacerations; apply orthopedic appliances such as knee immobilizers, envelope slings, orthotics, and similar devices; remove casts, splints and other external devices; obtain impressions for orthotics, padding and custom-molded shoes; select and adjust crutches to patient; and instruct patient in proper use of crutches.
- Remove sutures or staples from superficial incisions or lacerations.
- Perform ear lavage to remove impacted cerumen.
- Perform hearing tests under the direct supervision of a licensed physician and surgeon or podiatrist.
- Collect, by non-invasive techniques, and preserve specimens for testing, including urine, sputum, semen and stool.
- Swab the throat in order to preserve the specimen in a throat culture, as long as the supervising physician is on the premises.
- Assist patients in ambulation and transfers.
- Prepare patients for and assist the physician, podiatrist, physician assistant or registered nurse in examinations or procedures including positioning, draping, shaving and disinfecting treatment sites; and prepare patients for gait analysis testing.
- As authorized by the physician or podiatrist, provide patients with information and instructions, including how to give insulin injections to themselves.
- Perform simple laboratory and screening tests customarily performed in a medical office.
- Cut the nails of otherwise healthy patients.
- Administer first aid or cardiopulmonary resuscitation in an emergency.
- Administer flu shots, allergy shots, and other vaccines, and narcotic injections EXCEPT anesthetic agents (as long as physician verifies the correct medication and

dosage and is on the premises). Draw blood for tests, including "finger sticks" and venipuncture (requires additional training).

- Administer medication by inhalation (requires additional training).
- Perform nasal smears if the procedure is limited to the opening of the nasal cavity.
- Under supervision of a physician or optometrist, may perform simple non-invasive testing of visual acuity, pupils and ocular motility; automated visual field testing; ophthalmic photography and digital imaging; tonometry; lensometry; and non-subjective refraction.
- Under supervision of a physician or optometrist, may administer cycloplegiacs, mydratics and topical anesthetics that are not controlled substances for ophthalmic purposes; and perform pachymetry, keratometry, A scans, B scans and electrodiagnostic testing.

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## Take the MBC Newsletter Survey

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By contrast, medical assistants **SHALL NOT** perform any of the following tasks:

- Place a needle or start or disconnect the infusion tube of an IV. Medical assistants are not allowed to administer medications or injections into the IV line.
- Calculate a new serum dilution.
- Chart pupillary responses.
- Conduct a subjective refraction of a person's eyes.
- Insert urine catheters.
- Obtain urine samples from indwelling urinary catheters.
- Perform telephone triage.
- Inject collagen or Botox.
- Use lasers, intense light devices, or radiofrequency devices for any reason.
- Perform chemical peels or microdermabrasion.
- Administer chemotherapy.
- Apply orthopedic splints.
- Interpret results of skin tests, lab tests or pregnancy tests.
- Administer allergy skin tests.
- Cauterize a wound.

- Perform a wound check or assess the site or make any determination about the wound.
- Perform debridement or removal of eschar in wound care.
- Administer any kind of anesthetic agent, including topical lidocaine gel. Pre-draw and mix lidocaine and other anesthetics.
- Mix or compound any medications. (Except to reconstitute a medication by mixing with sterile water or other inert ingredient).
- Suture.
- Collect nasopharyngeal swabs.
- Apply an Unna boot.
- Administer oxygen to patients.
- Determine that a test is required.
- Perform sclerotherapy.

More information about medical assistants is available on the Board's website, at [http://www.mbc.ca.gov/Licensees/Physicians\\_and\\_Surgeons/Medical\\_Assistants/](http://www.mbc.ca.gov/Licensees/Physicians_and_Surgeons/Medical_Assistants/).

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## Provider Compliance Program *(continued from page 6)*

you must tailor your compliance program to suit your organizations' needs. To assist you, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has provided a number of helpful resources on its public website, such as the Roadmap for New Physicians and a series of voluntary compliance program guidance documents directed at various segments of the health care industry.

Dr. Wolfe reviewed key elements of effective compliance programs and directed physicians to follow the OIG's Guide for Physician Groups, which can be found at <http://oig.hhs.gov/authorities/docs/physician.pdf>.

[oig.hhs.gov/authorities/docs/physician.pdf](http://oig.hhs.gov/authorities/docs/physician.pdf). She also recommended free tools such as the Health Care Fraud Prevention and Enforcement Action Team (HEAT) Provider Compliance Training at <http://oig.hhs.gov/compliance/provider-compliance-training/index.asp>.

While no enforcement date has yet been issued, Dr. Wolfe urged all physicians, clinicians and providers of medical supplies to establish simple, useable compliance plans and to review them annually. "Implementation of a compliance program sends a message that an organization or practice conducts

itself in an ethical manner and is committed to quality, not only from a customer service perspective, but from a patient care perspective," Dr. Wolfe said.

Her complete presentation can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11E-9iXpyx0>. Advance to the presentation at 4 minutes and 29 seconds.

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**Please note:** All licensees and registrants are required to professionally use the name under which they are licensed or registered with the Medical Board of California. Using any other name may confuse or mislead the public and may be considered by the Board to be unprofessional conduct.