Empowering Medical Assistants Helps Improve Patient Care

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One medical group in Massachusetts learned the power of using medical assistants to improve quality of care.
Source: Physicians Practice

Running a healthcare practice presents unique challenges. Managers seek efficiency and productivity, while employees value career advancement, fulfillment, and work-life balance. Most importantly, patients expect — and deserve — a high quality of care.

Emerging healthcare trends like comprehensive and coordinated care focus on empowering the often underutilized medical assistant (MA).
“When given training, medical assistants can play a more vital role as part of the care team and can yield tremendous value to patients and healthcare providers,” Tom Strong, senior program officer at the Hitachi Foundation, a nonprofit organization, said in a Health Affairs blog post.
As healthcare organizations across the country find new ways to provide improved patient care, one approach is to elevate the role of medical assistants as part of the care team.

North Shore Physician Group Leads the Charge
One organization that made significant investments in its MAs with impressive results is North Shore Physicians Group (NSPG), located in Boston, Mass. In 2009, the group faced a diverse patient population and an influx of new patients, resulting in an overwhelming workload for physicians.
“We wanted to deliver care in a new and more efficient way, and we knew we needed to make big changes to accomplish that goal,” said Lindsay Gainer, director of clinical services and innovation at NSPG. To do so, they focused on three key steps to empower their MAs.

Step 1: Standardize the education of medical assistants
In 2010, NSPG launched a “Clinical Redesign” curriculum that provided consistent, high-caliber training for medical assistants across the entire organization. The training focused on enhancing the performance and job satisfaction of MAs by creating baseline standards, utilizing them more effectively in the patient care delivery model, and recognizing them as critical team members.

Step 2: Refine the role of the medical assistant
After NSPG MAs completed the training, the organization began making changes to their roles and responsibilities. MAs were charged with tasks like agenda setting, medication review, and routine screenings, better utilizing their skillset and moving them into new patient care roles.
“When we see the medical assistant as a valued member of the care team, they are empowered to address issues around chronic disease management. Functioning as a health coach in this manner helps patients feel comfortable and know they are receiving high-quality care,” Gainer said.

Step 3: Offer professional development opportunities
As MAs gained additional responsibility at NSPG, the organization created a number of leadership and professional development opportunities, including a Medical Assistant Council, an Employee Education Assistance Program, recognition of national certification, and a robust career ladder promoting growth within the group.
“I saw the professional development opportunities as accomplishments for medical assistants and a breakthrough for the profession,” said Laura Nichols, an NSPG medical assistant who moved up the career ladder and currently holds a position as a clinic supervisor.

The Results
NSPG has garnered astounding results from the initiative. They solved operational challenges by implementing innovative strategies and evolving a traditional, decades-old care model. This approach opened doors for both the medical assisting profession and their entire organization. The results included:
• Medical assistant turnover reduced by 14 percent
• Physician satisfaction scores increased by 14 percent
• The number of MAs seeking a national credential jumped by 48 percent
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• Patient satisfaction scores for Office Staff (2015 Massachusetts Health Quality Partners Patient Experience Survey) exceeded the statewide mean at 90 out of 100
For NSPG, as well as many others, there is a valid business case for training and elevating the role of the MA: practices support positive clinical and patient outcomes while promoting innovation within the care team, ultimately improving the quality of patient care.

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