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Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants

AA Professional Overview

Professional Definition

Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants (CAAs) are highly skilled health professionals who work under the direction of licensed physician Anesthesiologists to implement anesthesia care plans. CAAs work exclusively within the Anesthesia Care Team model as described by the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA). The goal of AA education is to guide the transformation of qualified student applicants into competent health care practitioners who aspire to work in the Anesthesia Care Team for the benefit of patients.

All AAs must complete a comprehensive didactic and clinical program at the **graduate school level**. To be admitted into an AA training program, students must have earned a baccalaureate degree with premedical coursework. AAs are trained extensively in the delivery and maintenance of quality anesthesia care as well as advanced patient monitoring techniques. AAs perform such tasks as administering drugs, obtaining vascular access, applying and interpreting monitors, establishing and maintaining patient airway, and assisting with preoperative assessment. AAs train and work under the supervision of physician Anesthesiologists who retain responsibility for the immediate care of the patient. The care team model expands the medical treatment provided by the physician Anesthesiologist and equips the medical facility to serve patients more effectively and efficiently.

History

In the early 1960s, leaders in the medical specialty of Anesthesiology recognized the existence of staffing shortages. To meet growing demands and to accommodate the increasing complexity of anesthesia and surgery, three Anesthesiologists (Drs. Gravenstein, Steinhaus and Volpitto) proposed the concept of an "anesthesia technologist" who would be a member of the anesthesia team and would be considered an "applied physiologist". This was the precursor to what is now the Anesthesiologist Assistant. The doctors designed an educational program whereby students would build on an undergraduate premedical education then earn a master's degree in Anesthesiology. The concept became reality in 1969 when the first AA training program began accepting students at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, followed shortly thereafter by a program at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

In 1989, the National Commission for Certification of Anesthesiologist Assistants (NCCAA) was established to create a national certification process. Since 2002, additional training programs have opened. Today, the ASA fully supports Anesthesiologist Assistants and the expansion of AA licensure and practice across the nation.

Scope of Practice

The scope of AA clinical practice is generally the same as that of nurse anesthetists on the Anesthesia Care Team. The local scope of practice of AAs is usually defined by the following:

- The medically directing Anesthesiologist
- The hospital credentialing body
- The state's board of medicine
- Any applicable state statute or regulation.

Practice Locations

Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants enjoy career pathways in a dynamic profession that continues to realize exponential growth as evidenced by the addition of new training sites and new states opening to AA practice. States, territories and districts in which CAAs work by license, regulation, and/or certification:

- Alabama
- Colorado
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Indiana
- Kentucky
- Missouri
- New Mexico
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- South Carolina
- Vermont
- Wisconsin
- U.S. Territory Guam

States in which AAs are granted practice privilege through physician delegation:

- Michigan
- Texas

If a state does not presently provide the legislative or delegatory option of AA practice, consultation should take place with the board of medicine or other governing body to explore the specific legal implications of AA practice in your state. General information on the steps to establish AA practice is available from the ASA's Office of Governmental and Legal Affairs. You may also inquire of other state Anesthesiology societies as to their local advocacy and procedural steps that may have led to gaining the option to hire AAs.

Recognized by Federal Government

AAs may practice at any Veterans Affairs facility in all 50 states.

The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recognizes both Certified AAs and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs) as non-physician anesthesia providers. Similarly, commercial insurance payers make no distinction between the two anesthetist types with regard to payments for services provided under medical direction by a physician Anesthesiologist.

Standard: Organization and Staffing

The organization of Anesthesia services must be appropriate to the scope of the services offered. Anesthesia must be administered only by the following providers:

- A qualified physician Anesthesiologist ;
- A doctor of medicine or osteopathy (other than an Anesthesiologist);
- A dentist, oral surgeon, or podiatrist who is qualified to administer anesthesia under state law;
- A CRNA, as defined in § 410.69(b) of the Federal Register, “who is under the supervision of the operating practitioner or of an Anesthesiologist who is immediately available if needed”; or
- An AA, as defined in § 410.69(b) of the Federal Register, “who is under the supervision of an Anesthesiologist who is immediately available if needed.”