



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ANESTHESIOLOGISTS

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ANESTHESIOLOGIST ASSISTANTS (AAs)

Anesthesiologist Assistants (AAs) are health professionals qualified by advanced education and clinical training to work under the medical direction of an anesthesiologist to develop and implement anesthesia care plans. AAs work exclusively within the Anesthesia Care Team environment as defined by ASA. The scope of practice for AAs is set forth in ASA's position paper entitled, "Recommended Scope of Practice of Nurse Anesthetists and Anesthesiologist Assistants."

The Department of Defense (DOD) has proposed a rule to include AAs as authorized anesthesia providers for TRICARE beneficiaries under the same conditions applied by CMS for Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries. In 1992, the Medicare program defined the term "anesthetist" to include both AAs and nurse anesthetists and added the services of AAs and nurse anesthetists to the list of covered medical services. Under the DOD proposed rule, AAs must work only under the direct supervision of an anesthesiologist; must comply with all applicable requirements of state law and be licensed, where applicable, by the state in which they practice; and they must have completed the appropriate educational requirements. Currently TRICARE recognizes only anesthesiologists and nurse anesthetists as authorized providers. ASA supports the proposed rule.

The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists claims that AAs are not qualified practitioners. ASA disagrees. In 1987 the ASA House of Delegates approved inclusion of AAs as participants in the Anesthesia Care Team. In 2000 the ASA House of Delegates approved recommendations to endorse efforts to educate, train and allow for the practice of AAs in as many states as anesthesiologists request their services. That House of Delegates also approved a recommendation that ASA formally state its recognition of and support of AAs as a member of the Anesthesia Care Team and a resolution that ASA endorse efforts to obtain licensure and reimbursement for AAs. The 2001 House of Delegates approved a category of educational membership for AAs. These actions build upon the 1975 House of Delegates' approval of a recommendation that component societies concern themselves with delineating the activities of AAs through their own state legislatures.

According to one of the largest insurers of AAs, the professional liability insurance rates charged to AAs and nurse anesthetists are the same. Furthermore, there is no evidence to indicate there is any difference between AAs and nurse anesthetists with respect to claims filed.

Currently only Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) and Emory University offer educational programs for AAs. Applicants to the medical school-based programs must have a bachelor's degree, with an above average performance in premedical courses, from an accredited institution. Required course work includes general biology, general chemistry, organic chemistry, biochemistry, general physics, calculus and statistics. Applicants to CWRU must have scored at least 20 on the Medical College Admission Test. Applicants to Emory must have quantitative Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores exceeding the 55th percentile and analytical GRE scores exceeding the 60th percentile.

The science-based course work of the two year AA programs includes both didactic and clinical education. Students spend over 2000 hours in clinical rotations with more than 500 cases. Up to 10 percent of graduates have proceeded to medical school without having to double back to acquire premed courses.

The master's degree programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP). CAAHEP accredits numerous allied health programs. Graduates of CWRU receive a Master of Science in Anesthesiology (M.S.A.); graduates of Emory receive a Master of Medical Science Program in Anesthesiology and Patient Monitoring Systems (M.M.Sc.).

Graduates of the AA programs take the national certification exam sponsored by the National Commission for Certification of Anesthesiologist Assistants (NCCAA). The first certifying examination was administered in 1992. The 5 1/2 hour examination is administered by the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME). Those who pass the examination are designated Anesthesiologist Assistant – Certified (AA-C) and must submit 40 hours of continuing medical education credits biennially for certification renewal. Every six years, the AA-C must complete a 5 1/2 hour Continued Demonstration of Qualifications (CDQ) examination, also administered by the NBME. The first CDQ examination was administered in 1998.

In recent years, AAs have begun to seek licensure as a category of providers under state law, rather than practicing as an unlicensed provider under the delegatory authority of an anesthesiologist as permitted by state law. In Alabama, New Mexico, Ohio, and South Carolina AAs are licensed and regulated by the state medical boards. In Georgia, AAs are licensed as Type B Physician's Assistants. Legislation is pending in several states to license AAs.

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