

Timely Topics

PAYMENT AND PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

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What can Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants Bring to Your Practice? By David Biel, CAA

Many practicing Physician Anesthesiologists are unaware that they have a choice when hiring anesthetists. If you live in one of the 17 jurisdictions, including Washington DC and even Guam, where Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants (CAAs) are authorized to practice, CAAs can make a difference in your practice. If you live outside those areas, you are part of the only medical specialty that has only one option for physician extenders. If you would like to learn more about licensing CAAs in your state, please contact the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) or American Academy of Anesthesiologist Assistants (AAAA).

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 (ACT) environment as described by ASA. All CAAs possess a premedical background, a baccalaureate degree, and also complete a comprehensive didactic and clinical program at the graduate school level. CAAs are trained extensively in the delivery and maintenance of quality anesthesia care as well as advanced patient monitoring techniques.

All AA training programs are housed within or affiliated with a university with a medical school which either has an anesthesiology residency program in place, or the capability to have one. People often ask what a CAA brings to the table. From day one, CAAs are trained by Physician Anesthesiologists in the care team model. The ACT approach to patient care underscores CAA's education, training, and practice.

CAAs are recognized by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Tricare, and commercial payers. Under physician anesthesiologist medical direction, CMS makes no distinction between anesthetist type. Medicare recognizes both certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) and CAAs as "non-physician anesthesia providers", with no differences in payment. Physician Anesthesiologists may medically direct up to 4 rooms. With the right payer mix, the ACT with CAAs is a sustainable revenue model in the ever increasing environment of downward pressures on payment.

Competition in the market place is a good thing. This includes the anesthetist pool. In major markets where CAAs have been working for years, anesthetist's salaries tend to be lower in that region. Within anesthesia groups where CAAs work, there is no difference in salary compared to that of other non-physician anesthesia providers, but introducing more providers tends to drive salaries downward. It is simple supply and demand economics. There are several opportunities to find well qualified CAAs in the market place. The popular online Anesthesia employment resources include CAAs with their own specific listing on many. The AAAA website (www.anesthetist.org) also offers a job listing service. With over 2000 members the AAAA can be a great resource for finding CAAs. Another proven method

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of introducing as well as hiring CAAs into your practice, is to become an affiliated clinical rotation site with one or more of the existing Anesthesiologist Assistant (AA) training programs. You will have a steady stream of senior AA students throughout the year. They will spend four weeks with your group on a general anesthesia rotation or on a specialized rotation such as pediatric or cardiac anesthesia. Think of it as a 30 day interview. You will be able to pick and choose from a large potential applicant pool, and choose to offer jobs to only those that best fit your particular practice. Even if you are outside of current CAA practice areas, you are still able to help train AA students at your site. It's a great way to introduce CAAs into your practice and get a feel for the unique ACT practice model that CAAs bring with them.

There are currently 10 AA training programs throughout the country. With the Department of Anesthesiology, Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) commencing a formal feasibility assessment to bring an anesthesiologist assistant educational program to the Wisconsin market, an 11th may be starting soon. There are approximately 200 – 230 new CAA graduates each year. All the programs have multiple clinical rotation sites already set up. The process is well defined and easy to accomplish. If you have interest in setting up a clinical rotation for AA students at your facility, please contact one of the AA programs for more information.

Please contact ASA or AAAA, if you have questions about CAAs or would like to learn more about implementing CAAs into your practice.