

# Anesthesiology Assistant

- Anesthesiologist assistants occupy a growing segment of the health care community. As valued members of the anesthesia care team, these professionals provide very important assistance to the anesthesiologist in treating patients before and after surgery. The work of an anesthesiologist assistant (or AA) directly contributes to the success of surgical operations by ensuring the comfort and wellbeing of the patient.
- AAs perform their duties under the direct supervision and discretion of the supervising medical anesthesiologist. Chief responsibilities include:
  - Conducting physical exams and pre-procedure interviews
  - Proposing anesthesia care plans to the anesthesiologist
  - Administering general or local anesthesia
  - Monitoring patients under anesthesia
  - Inserting invasive monitoring devices
  - Operating advanced life support systems
- The assistants spend a portion of their workday conducting important administrative procedures such as database management tasks and collecting patient data. Additionally, most AAs conduct post-anesthesia rounds on recovering patients.
- Though the profession has existed in healthcare for over four decades, at this time not all states allow anesthesiologist assistants to practice; prospective AAs should check the statutes in the state where they plan to work.
  
- **Work Environment**
  - Anesthesiologist assistants generally find employment in hospitals in the surgical and emergency care departments. Sterile, cool, and brightly illuminated operating rooms are the normal work environment for AAs. They conduct much of their work on their feet and are often on call on weekends and evenings. Reporting to the supervising anesthesiologist, AAs are subject to close scrutiny and direction. Like all professionals with duties surrounding the operating room, anesthesiologist assistants painstakingly follow strict protocols in order maximize the success of the patient's complete recovery.
  
- **Education**
  - This profession requires a master's degree. Prior to obtaining a master's degree, students should obtain a bachelor's degree with an emphasis in the sciences such as chemistry and biology. If possible, undergrads should attend an accredited college or university with a good science or pre-med program. This is a competitive field and excellent academics are required for entry into medical programs. The required GPA for many institutions is 3.0, although applicants may find that they need a minimum of 3.4 in order to get accepted.

- Students preparing for graduate school should take the GRE or MCAT. Depending upon the school, one of these pre-admission tests is required. (Either test can be retaken to achieve a higher score.)
  - Apply to an accredited school that grants anesthesiologist assistant degrees. The American Academy of Anesthesiologist Assistants lists the ten or so schools that offer a master's program in this area. Programs offering a Master's of Science in Nursing (MSN) in anesthesia are completely different, requiring a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing prior to admission. Prospective anesthesiologist assistants should talk to the school's career counselor advisor at every level of education in order to avoid costly mistakes.
  - The AA program takes a full 24 months to complete, and only full-time study is allowed. The program itself is rigorous and requires long, demanding hours, especially during the clinical component. Didactic and clinical classes may be scheduled seven days per week on occasion. The two years of this program afford students only a limited number of short, scheduled breaks.
- **Training**
    - Most schools require a minimum number of job-shadowing hours with an anesthesia care team (or ACT) before approving admission to the graduate program. Students may meet this requirement on their own during college clinical work or through networking with former instructors. Others opt for an alternate approach of contacting a local operating room (OR) supervisor, as these health care professionals sometimes work with the anesthesia department to arrange for job-shadowing opportunities.
- **Licensing and/or Certification**
    - While certification may not be required to practice in a particular state, it greatly improves an applicant's marketability wherever job opportunities present themselves. The National Commission for Certification of Anesthesiologist Assistants (NCCAA) is the best place to begin this investigation. Instituted in 1989, the NCCAA oversees the six-year certification process for AAs in the United States.
- **Necessary Skills and Qualities**
    - AAs demonstrate many of the same qualities required by other technical and general health care professions. These assistants must be good listeners, capable of following critical instructions from the anesthesiologist. Possessing a strong sense of ethics, AAs are observant, patient, compassionate, responsive, open-minded, tolerant and dedicated professionals.

- **Opportunities for Advancement**

- Although entry-level employment in this field requires a master's degree and certification, there are opportunities for advancement as an anesthesiologist assistant. With experience come opportunities to assume leadership positions (such as head anesthetist, for example) within a department or facility. Becoming a faculty member and teaching anesthesiologist assistant students is another promising path for an experienced AA. AA professional bodies and advocacy groups often hire AAs who have significant experience and a desire to educate others in the community while strengthening their field through leadership.

- **Salary and Job Outlook**

- According to the AMA, in 2006 (the most recent job-specific data) anesthesiologist assistants earn from \$95,000 to \$120,000 per year. Credentialing and experience may increase an annual salary to anywhere from \$160,000 to \$180,000.
- Meanwhile, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the median salary for all physician assistants – which includes anesthesiologist assistants but doesn't focus on them specifically – is \$95,820. The lowest 10% of physician assistants earn an estimated \$64,100, while the highest 10% earn closer to \$134,720.
- Salary.com estimates that physician assistants practicing in a surgical context earn an average \$98,586 annually, compared to physician assistants overall who could expect an average salary of \$93,855.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that job growth for all physician assistants (including anesthesiologist assistants) will be a robust 38% from 2012-2022. As this is much faster than average job growth, the outlook for this career is very good.