

Unit Three

Competence from a patient's perspective

Key messages

This unit will:

- *introduce the role of the health care assistant (HCA)*
- *explain the tasks an HCA might carry out in your practice*
- *explain how your practice can make sure the HCA is competent to do their job*
- *explain how you can be involved in helping the practice to assess the HCA role.*

The HCA role

The HCA post has been around in hospitals and social care settings for a number of years, and has more recently been introduced into general practice. An HCA is a non-professionally qualified member of staff who works closely with a registered professional, usually a nurse, and undertakes tasks and duties that are delegated by that registered professional. HCAs will have been assessed a number of times by a qualified member of staff in each of the tasks that they undertake to demonstrate that they are competent.

The range of tasks undertaken by HCAs varies from practice to practice. A recent review of training programmes for HCAs provides some idea of the kinds of tasks that HCAs might undertake in your practice. These include:

- *new patient checks*
- *phlebotomy (taking a blood sample)*
- *spirometry (checking to see how a patient's lungs are working)*
- *blood pressure checks*
- *healthy lifestyle advice*
- *helping patients to stop smoking, loose weight and take up exercise*
- *stocking up of clinic rooms*
- *checking and updating patient records*
- *cleaning and checking instruments.*

As a patient, you can expect your practice to ensure that all staff keep themselves up to date and that they are competent in the tasks they perform.

You will find information about the different roles of practice staff in practice leaflets. Ask your practice receptionist about these leaflets at your next visit.

HCAs make an important contribution to the care of patients and are a valued member of the practice team. It is important that your practice can demonstrate that the HCA has the right skills, knowledge and experience to do their job. A national set of standards have been drawn up to describe the standards that are expected of someone doing a particular task in the NHS, eg taking a blood sample or checking blood pressure. These standards are called competences and this unit tells you how competences work.

What is a competence?

Skills for Health is the Sector Skills Council for the healthcare sector (<http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk>). One of their roles is to write the competences for the healthcare workforce.

Skills for Health describe competences as:

The descriptors of the performance criteria, knowledge and understanding that are required to undertake work activities. They describe what individuals need to do and to know to carry out the activity – regardless of who performs it.

Competences are standards that can be measured or assessed. Once a competence has been assessed it shows that a person has reached a safe standard of practice to carry out the task, sometimes without direct and continual supervision. Competence assessments also help the HCA to know how well they are doing in their job.

The HCA in your practice may be currently involved in training and assessment of their competence to carry out a task. The practice manager, practice nurse or HCA will be able to explain how training and the assessment process work, and how they ensure the HCA is competent to perform tasks related to your care.

Playing your part

You may be asked to complete a feedback form, which will help your practice to evaluate and improve their services. Any information that you give will be confidential and will only be used to assess the way in which the HCA has performed their role. You do not need to take part in any assessment and your care will not be affected if you choose not to take part. See [Tool – Patient feedback form](#) to view a sample patient feedback form.

Summary

- *HCA's have been around in the NHS for many years and they are becoming more common in general practice.*
- *HCA's carry out a number of common tasks to support nurses and GPs in taking care of patients.*
- *You should expect your practice to have policies and procedures to ensure that their staff, including HCA's, are properly supervised, trained and competent to carry out their role.*
- *Competence assessments help the HCA to know how well they are doing in their job.*
- *You may be asked to help the practice by giving feedback on the care you received from the HCA.*