

Unit Two

Good employment practice from a patient's perspective

Key messages

Reading this unit will:

- introduce the role of the health care assistant (HCA)
- explain the kinds of things an HCA might carry out in your practice
- explain what you can expect from your practice.

The HCA's 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 scope of the HCA's role in general practice.

The Potential Range of HCA Duties in General Practice

- New patient registration
- Blood pressure checks
- Urinalysis
- Height/weight/BMI
- Ordering supplies/stock control
- Cleaning sterilisation equipment
- Phlebotomy/venopuncture
- Ordering vaccines
- ECG recording
- Peak-flow measurement
- Spirometry
- Audiometry
- Smoking cessation
- Restocking of clinical area
- Health promotion
- Supporting practice nurse triage
- Minor-illness clinics
- Assist in minor operations
- Infection control
- Health checks
- Summarising patient records
- Act as chaperone
- Helicobacter testing
- Patient recall
- Helping with specific long-term conditions, eg diabetes, asthma

As a patient you can expect your practice to:

- have defined roles for staff which are clearly explained either through leaflets, posters or the practice website.
- ensure that staff have appropriate qualifications, are competent to undertake the role and are up-to-date with new procedures and legislation.
- have a policy for checking the qualifications and backgrounds of their staff including both permanent and locum staff
- ensure that any matters that you discuss with the practice team are confidential and that your personal information is held in line with the Data Protection Act (see [Unit 7: Integration of health care assistants in the general practice workforce](#)).

The practice manager should be able to provide you with evidence of this if you have any concerns. See [Unit 7: Integration of health care assistants in the general practice workforce](#), for more information about confidentiality of data within the practice team.

Example: Patient quote

"As a patient, when I go to the doctors I think about how my needs are going to be met. I'm not so worried about employment laws at that time but more about whether the people I see are competent enough to provide the services I need and professional enough not to talk about me in a derogatory manner when I have gone. If good employment practices help this to happen then that's great."
(Patient, Stoke-on-Trent)

Example: The HCA's role

You have made an appointment to see the doctor because you have been feeling unwell. After the doctor has examined you, Dr Brown decides that you need to have a blood test to help diagnose your health problem.

He asks you to wait outside until you are called by the HCA who will take the blood sample. While waiting, you read the poster that explains the role of the HCA and the tasks that they are competent to perform.

You ask the HCA, Jane, what training she has undertaken and she shows you her certificate for completing a phlebotomy (blood taking) course. She also explains that the practice nurse has watched her taking blood on a number of occasions and considers her to be competent.

Jane explains carefully what she is about to do and you follow her directions. The blood sample is successfully taken and you go home to await the results of the test.

The HCA can undertake a number of different tasks and you might like to look at a job description to find out more about the role (see [Tool - Job description for a health care assistant \(basic\)](#)).

Education and training

Nationally, there are no requirements for HCAs to be registered with a professional organisation – nurses are registered with the Nursing Midwifery Council (NMC) – although this is being considered. However, HCAs are trained to undertake tasks and are then assessed as being competent by the nurse or health professional with whom they work closely. In practice, HCAs attend a number of courses where they gain competencies and skills to support their work in the practice. Unit 5 on education and training will explain more clearly the types of qualifications that can be gained (see [Unit 5: Education and training](#)).

Each job has a job description (see [Tool - Job description for a health care assistant \(basic\)](#)) and person specification (see [Tool - Person specification form template](#)) attached to it.

The person specification lists the essential and desirable skills/qualifications that the HCA needs in order to successfully practise. When a person applies for a post, their particular skills and qualifications will be matched against what is ideally required. If there appears to be a close match, they will be interviewed. Some practices may ask patient's representatives to sit on the interview panel for HCA posts to ensure that a patient view is considered before employing a new member of staff. This will normally be done by the practice approaching the patient forum or the primary care trust's (PCTs) Patient Advisory Liaison Service (PALS). You can contact your local PALS by:

- *phoning your local PCT, GP surgery or health centre and asking for the details of the PALS*
- *phoning NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.*

Once the HCA has been successful in gaining a position, the practice will need to check certain criteria. They should check whether:

- *references from former places of employment are acceptable*
- *the HCA's personal identity and qualifications are valid*
- *the HCA has any entry with the Criminal Records Bureau.*

Once the new HCA is in post, the practice or PCT (whoever is the employer) is responsible for ensuring that they are competent at their job. This will mean that they will be assessed by a senior nurse or GP to see that they perform their role in the proper manner. Sometimes practices will use a record of competence document to record that this assessment has been done (see [Unit 3: Competences](#)).

Standards of care

HCA's will have an annual appraisal within the practice where their performance is discussed. However, there should also be a system in place to provide regular monitoring of an HCA's performance, so that feedback can be given at regular intervals. If you wish to give feedback on an HCA's performance, you should speak to the practice manager who may then relay your comments to the HCA themselves.

Summary

- *HCA's have been around in the NHS for many years, they are becoming more common in general practice.*
- *HCA's carry out a number of common tasks to support nurses and GPs in looking after 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.*