

NHA[®] Medical Assistant (CCMA) Certification

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Introduction

The role of the medical assistant (MA) is evolving and the number of MAs needed in the workforce is on an upswing. With the evolution of these changes, the necessity for MAs to be well-trained and qualified is of critical importance. The National Healthcareer Association (NHA)[®] Medical Assistant (CCMA) Certification program offers a high-stakes certification examination with the purpose of evaluating the knowledge and skills associated with the performance of tasks required for entry-level practice as a MA. This whitepaper focuses on the examination development process for the CCMA exam, including the processes for assessing the validity of the exam and the reliability of scores.

Before undertaking a review of the examination development process, we want to share information about the medical assistant profession as it stands today, where it is going and the importance of certification for medical assistants.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF MAs

Before undertaking a review of the examination development process, it is helpful to note that the field of medical assisting is on an upswing. Job postings per medical assistants completing training programs more than doubled between 2011 and 2014, and the faster-than-average employment growth is likely to continue over the next decade. In addition, healthcare system redesign strategies are encouraging all providers — e.g. doctors, physician assistants, nurses, nurse practitioners, pharmacists — to work at the top of their licenses. This is opening opportunities for medical assistants to engage in higher-level responsibilities such as stepping into the role of a flow manager, running team huddles, preplanning patient visits and completing various health screenings. Some organizations are now considering their most experienced MAs for the roles of scribe, health coach, patient navigator, population health manager and patient care coordinator. As medical assistants broaden their skill set, there will be significant pressure to perform at a higher level in the areas of professionalism, informatics and performing clinical tasks.

The Value of Certification

Certification is a standard measurement of knowledge and core competencies. “Certified” credentials, particularly those from a national certification program, may lead to more job opportunities, higher pay, greater job security and mobility across state lines. A recent industry outlook survey, prepared for NHA by Hanover Research (January 2017), found that 88% of employers and educators agree certification is important because it provides credibility, boosts career opportunities and increases demand. Accordingly, by employing certified healthcare workers, employers benefit from a workforce with standardized knowledge, expedited workflow and improved overall patient safety and satisfaction. Building on a workforce of credentialed medical assistants, employers are investing in these employees by having a heightened focus on continuing education, mentorship/coaching, and additional skills training.

CONSUMERS OF CERTIFICATION

In the medical assistant certification space, there are three types of consumers: individual certification candidates, employers of medical assistants and medical assistant educators. Although each of these consumers has different priorities in selecting a certification provider, they all want to be assured their certification program meets the high quality standards of a national accreditor. The NHA CCMA is accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the leading accreditor for allied health certifications in the U.S. (See the “Accreditation” section on page 5 for more information.)

- **Individuals** selecting a certification provider next look at employer recognition of the credential, price, convenient testing locations, quality preparation tools and customer service.
- **Employers** look at the quality of the certification program (see the Examination Development section below), the support services provided to the employer to assess the readiness of employees to sit for the exam, the alignment of the exam to the employer’s workforce needs and the cost impact of training their workforce.
- **Educators** seek a certification partner that supports student success throughout the training program, as well as recognition of the certification by potential employers in order to enhance hiring opportunities for students.

Examination Development Process

The CCMA exam is developed by following rigorous best practices found within the testing industry, specifically by adhering to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (2014). The test development process is outlined in the following sections as evidence of the reliability of the CCMA exam and the validity of the score inferences.

INTENDED USE

The CCMA is a high-stakes certification examination with the purpose of evaluating the knowledge and skills associated with the performance of tasks required for entry-level practice as a medical assistant. It is intended solely for the purpose of certification and awarding credentials to qualified medical assistants. The examination is not intended to be a direct predictor of job performance. The fundamental

mandate governing the examination is to assess whether or not an entry-level candidate has successfully demonstrated the minimum core competencies necessary to be certified to practice as a medical assistant.

QUESTION FORMAT

Questions, also referred to as “items,” on the CCMA exam are presented in a four-option, multiple choice format with a single correct answer. The items are assembled into a test form according to the content domain topic percentages set forth in the test plan. (This is described in further detail within the Validity Evidence section below, along with critical thinking levels required by the test plan.) Each examination form is comprised of 150 scored questions plus an additional 30 unscored pretest questions. All candidate responses to the CCMA scored items are assessed as correct or incorrect, with no partial credit awarded for any item and no penalty for guessing.

SCORE INTERPRETATIONS

The CCMA exam is a pass/fail exam with a range of possible scaled scores from 200 to 500. Scores across all forms of the CCMA examination are equated and are directly comparable. The cut score for the exam is a score of 390 (see additional information about cut score processes in the “Item Development” section on the following page). A candidate’s score is compared to this cut score. A score of 390 or higher are considered passing scores. If a candidate fails the exam, he or she will receive a score report containing a diagnostic breakdown of his or her performance within the major content domains. Candidates who fail the exam must wait at least one month before retaking the exam. Candidates who are unsuccessful after two attempts will be required to wait one full year prior to testing again.

VALIDITY EVIDENCE

An exam score is considered valid if it measures what it intends to measure and nothing else. Gathering validity evidence is an ongoing process and is captured in all phases from building the exam to post-administration. Therefore, validity is considered a matter of degree for an exam and not all or none. The test score, interpretation and proposed uses are evaluated for validity evidence, not the exam itself.

TEST PLAN

Building content validity evidence rests on the appropriateness of the test content and the procedures followed in specifying and generating the test content. The CCMA exam is constructed using content that directly aligns with the objectives of the test plan, outlined by subject matter experts. The detailed test plan, which also may be referred to as the content outline or examination blueprint, is based on the results of a nationwide job task analysis study in which industry thought leaders, educators, employers from organizations of various sizes and currently practicing medical assistants with various experience from across the nation participate. This process includes a survey asking about the frequency and importance of tasks performed within the profession. The most recent survey was sent to approximately 10,000 individuals associated with the medical assistant profession. In addition, individuals are engaged in interviews, focus groups, and task teams to capture their perspectives.

Based on the data obtained from these activities, a psychometrician-facilitated discussion is held with a job task analysis committee, composed of subject matter experts. This discussion is conducted in order to organize the test plan into content domains. The final deliverable from this process is the exam content specifications, or test plan. A group of trained test developers and content subject matter experts built each examination form to strictly meet these exam specifications. The current test plan is available to download at nhanow.com.

ITEM DEVELOPMENT

Items, or questions, are developed by subject matter experts in which each proposed item is supported with citation to specific reference materials. The proposed items are then reviewed by other subject matter experts to ensure the content meets an intended job task specification and is free from content and editorial errors.

Items that pass this review are then sent through a bias review process in which a committee of four to five individuals, are trained in fairness and sensitivity standards, read each item for potentially biased or inflammatory wording. Any items flagged at this step must be revised prior to use and may be

rejected. Although the bias review committee completes a qualitative check of all items on the examination to ensure items are not biased toward any particular demographic group, additional quantitative item level analyses are conducted to flag items where performance is different for subgroups of interest (e.g., gender and ethnicity). This is done to examine potential sources of construct-irrelevant variance, or to identify extraneous factors that are unrelated to what the test is intended to measure. Differential item functioning and test completion analysis results are also conducted. Administration summary statistics of the exam are tracked and kept in the Technical Manual.

Before a first form for a new test plan is released for use, it is placed within a provisional scoring environment. Psychometricians evaluate how items are performing on an initial representative sample of candidates. These items are all evaluated based on psychometric principles such as the proportion responding correctly, the correlation between the candidates' performance on each item and the performance on the examination as a whole. After all items have been assessed and a final set of items meeting the required level of performance are identified, a cut score study is conducted. This study is completed by content subject matter experts who rate the difficulty level of each item as it relates to an established definition of a minimally qualified practitioner. These ratings are transformed into a passing score and the subject matter expert committee reviews the impact data relative to this passing score for acceptability. The results of the cut score study are presented to the NHA Certification Governing Board, an independent board that oversees examination development and administration, for approval prior to implementation.

RELIABILITY EVIDENCE

The reliability of test scores is a precondition for their validity, but not the whole of validity. Reliability refers to the consistency of test scores across different administrations of the same test, alternate forms or other parallel test forms. In more concrete terms, if test scores fluctuate a great deal over time, within forms or across items, the test may not be able to measure what it is supposed to measure regardless of the validity evidence available (Thompson, 2003). It is important to note that tests themselves do not have reliability, only the test scores derived from them do.



Reliability of test scores is a function of both the test and the examinees to whom the test is administered (Thompson & Vacha-Haase, 2000). Although, like all other standardized tests, NHA's reliability findings will not directly transfer to individual test takers. To the degree that test takers are similar to the sample used for the reliability study, users can reasonably expect comparable reliability of test scores on the CCMA exam.

The focus of a reliability study is dependent on how scores are expected to generalize or remain consistent. In the case of the CCMA, the primary interest is in how scores might be expected to generalize to parallel tests constructed of different items. Subsequent forms developed with the same test plan are built from the pretest items that have appropriate statistical properties and according to the same test specifications. Because the item statistics are known for these items, the overall test statistics for the subsequent forms are inferred and scores can be statistically equated to account for differences in the difficulty level. Additionally, reliability estimates are calculated for each major content domain, as well as overall, to ensure that items of similar content are performing in a manner that is consistent with expectations.

ACCREDITATION

The development process, in addition to the rules, policies and procedures for administering the exam, is validated through the awarding of accreditation. The CCMA has maintained accreditation by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) since the accreditation was first awarded in 2011, including full reaccreditation in 2014. Designation of accreditation provides assurance that the certification examination has undergone repeated, extensive evaluation by an accrediting agency and consistently has demonstrated a high level of quality as an assessment instrument.

The NHA Solution

The CCMA program is the preferred certification for many consumers because NHA has invested substantially in exam quality, as described previously, and support services.

As part of its support services, NHA offers certification preparation materials that are aligned with the test plan. The certification preparation materials are intended to assist and guide candidates in preparing to take the certification exam. This includes review-level content on major topics that may be on the exam, practice quizzes and practice tests to validate comprehension, along with reporting to help identify areas of weakness and remediation to provide focused review content to address those weaknesses. NHA medical assistant prep materials are designed using current adult learning theory and are delivered in multiple formats, including interactive online and mobile platforms.

NHA also supports instructors, in both educational institutions and employers' training programs, by providing detailed data analysis that helps identify topics for which additional training is needed by individuals or the entire class. Following NHA's best practices and utilizing the data analytics allows instructors to continuously strengthen the curriculum for their training program with each cohort.

Finally, NHA provides industry-leading customer service. When candidates are ready to sign up to sit for the certification exam, they are systematically guided through the NHA certification process from start to finish to ensure they understand exam eligibility requirements, how to register to take an exam, locations of convenient testing sites and how to access to their exam results. For those who pass the exam, credentials are awarded.

A library of continuing education materials on the latest trends and topics is provided by NHA to keep CCMA credential holders current and prepared to meet recertification requirements. All of this is backed by an industry-leading support team that is available to help with any questions or issues that a candidate, instructor or CCMA-credentialed medical assistant might have.

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