

A doctor's perspective on staff certification

Why certification is important and what you – and your practice – can do about it

BY ROBERT M. KERSHNER, MD, MS, FACS

To be competitive in today's health care environment, ophthalmic practices need to demonstrate competence, knowledge, and skill at all levels. The physician and the ophthalmic medical technicians and technologists (OMTs) all reflect the quality of the practice. It begs the question: All physicians take the time to obtain board certification; why shouldn't technicians?

Consider that certified ophthalmic assistants (COA), technicians (COT) and technologists (COMT) have been shown to increase productivity, patient satisfaction and practice efficiency.¹ OMTs are the patients first clinical contact with the practice. At all levels of certification, they can greet and escort the patient, take a history, measure refractive correction, instill eyedrops, perform the ophthalmic examination, and provide explanations and patient education.

OMTs can also assist the ophthalmologist during the professional examination, record the data in the electronic medical record. They can perform ancillary and advanced diagnostic procedures, as well as maintain equipment and assist at surgery.

Through certification, the Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology (JCAHPO) examines and tests specifically for the knowledge and performance associated with these OMT responsibilities. The commission reviews the examination-based certification process every five years to make sure that the tasks and procedures performed by ophthalmic assistants, technicians, medical technologists, and surgical assistants are adequately covered.

Reassuring the patient

As a physician, I am a provider of healthcare services as well as a

consumer. When I visit a physician specialist, I want to know that he or she is board certified. Certification does not guarantee competence, but it does reassure me that the physician made the effort to study — and had adequate knowledge to pass — the examination. Staff certification provides the same reassurance.

When certification credentials are displayed in a prominent place, it tells patients that the practice's technicians are highly trained, professional, and can demonstrate competence.

An outdated argument

Why then, are so few ophthalmic assistants certified? Frequently, my colleagues tell me it's not that important — medical assistants can be trained to become ophthalmic without the expense of certification. After all, if the physician trains them too well, they might just want to leave and get a better job. This

outdated argument should go the way of the erysophake.

Why consider certification?

Ophthalmic technicians might ask, "why go to all the trouble of getting an education and obtaining certification, when you can get hired and just start working?" There are several very good reasons:

- The program, prerequisites, and required courses of study are already established for both obtaining a degree and for preparing for the certifying examinations.
- The established time frame is known, following which work is possible.
- To make the education affordable, many programs offer scholarships and loans and allow students time for outside employment to help with living expenses.
- The education is yours for life. Should you change jobs, your degree, certification, and experience go with you.

What does it take?

Candidates are eligible for certification if they have completed one of the following: 1) an accredited formal clinical training program (no work experience necessary); 2) an accredited formal training program with specified work experience; or 3) an independent home study course or distance learning program with specified work experience.

Although a formal training program, usually one year for COA and two or more years for

The road to recognition

In 1969, JCAHPO began certifying ophthalmic medical personnel¹. Since then, more than 25,000 individuals the world over, have earned certification. Due to JCAHPO's efforts, the classification of Ophthalmic Medical Technician is now officially recognized as an occupational listing by the United States Bureau of Labor's Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). This classification distinguishes the ophthalmic allied health professional from the general medical assisting community. All three levels of JCAHPO certification (COA, COT, and COMT) are included in this job class. Certified ophthalmic technicians have finally achieved the recognition that they deserve.

COT and COMT, is a fast track to a degree and certification, able and highly motivated ophthalmic assistants can learn the basics from home study with a textbook or with distance learning courses online.

The Commission on Accreditation of Ophthalmic Medical Programs accredits the formal training programs, of which there are about 32 in North America.

Your next step?

- To learn more about job positions, salary survey, and how to network with your fellow OMTs, consider becoming a member of the Association of Technical Personnel in Ophthalmology. For information, visit www.ATPO.org.
- For more information on finding accredited programs in your area, visit www.coa-omp.org/.
- To learn about employment opportunities for ophthalmic technicians, visit <http://www.aao.org/aaof/practice-management/tech-training.cfm>.

A final thought

The American Academy of Ophthalmology reports that there is a critical shortage of ophthalmic medical personnel and predicts that this shortage will get worse as the population ages and the demand for ophthalmic care increases. Start planning to help meet this growing medical need. Obtain an education, gain experience, and get yourself certified. **OP**

1. Woodworth KE Jr1, Donsbik PC, Ehlers WH, Pucel DJ, Anderson LD, Thompson NA. A comparative study of the impact of certified and noncertified ophthalmic medical personnel on practice quality and productivity. *Eye Contact Lens*. 2008 Jan;34(1):28-34.

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