

The Role and Expectations of Medical Administrative Assistant in a Tertiary Referral Ministry of Health Hospital in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Short Title: Medical Administrative Assistant role in Ministry of Health Hospital in Saudi Arabia

Areej Batawi

Abstract: Introduction: The primary assumption in a healthcare system is that the role of a medical administrative assistant (MAA) and a doctor is to share one objective – to provide clinical care of the patient. This invariably impels the MAA to play a part in such care, that they are neither trained for nor duty-bound. To understand this better a survey was performed to evaluate what the physicians and the MAA expected the role of the MAA assistant should be. Methods: A questionnaire containing 33 questions related to the responsibilities of MAA was developed and distributed to the physicians and MAA in a tertiary referral hospital in Makkah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Results: In total 37 completed the questionnaire. Of the 33 only two and six questions scored a 100%, correct response by the physicians and MAA respectively. Nearly 90% of physicians and 70% of MAA, considered the MAA to have a clinical role. Both the physicians and MMA answered more than 60% of the questions pertaining to administration correctly. However, the correct response rate to questions related to clinical responsibilities were as low as 11% and 28% by the physicians and MAA, respectively. Conclusion: This first study of its kind highlights the misunderstanding of the clinical responsibility of the MAA. Either the healthcare system should raise the awareness of the appropriate exclusive administrative role of MAA devoid of clinical responsibility or extend the duties of MAA to a full medical secretary.

Keywords: Medical administrative assistant, healthcare organization, physician

1. Introduction

A medical administrative assistant (MAA) carries significant responsibilities and challenges. Their role in running a successful healthcare organization should not be underestimated just because they do not directly interact with patients. The tasks of MAA is varied and can be broadly classified into three categories. One is information processing, requests or letters obtained from one department or from higher authorities that needs to be processed and dispatched appropriately like photocopying and distributing memos. Two monitoring information like maintaining meeting diaries and noting meeting minutes. Finally boundary controlling, where MAA acts as mediator between consultants, team and other departments[1]. Given that MAA works in healthcare organization in different departments that have divergent needs, trying to fix their roles may generate problems. The organization structure in which the MAA works is challenging. MAA are directly under the medical administrative department, however they are primarily responsible to the consultant with whom they work. This creates organization confrontation. The consultants' primary focus is clinical practice whereas the administrative departments' main concern is smooth running of the administrative machinery. This creates role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict for the MAA.

Conflict among workers in a global healthcare issue seen at all grades[2,3]. Conflicts generate rivalry. Power struggle to control employees, organizational hierarchy leadership strategies and need to perform multiple tasks exacerbate conflict [4]. Collaborative work between different staff is essential, enhances quality and advances patient outcomes [5].

Knowing what role MAA plays and what other staff expect from MAA is not fully explored. To understand this better and to inform the policymakers, this study is being conducted. Hence, the aim of this study is to know the MAA's understanding of their responsibilities and the physician's expectations of the role of MAA.

2. Methods

Setting

This study was conducted in King Abdullah Medical City, a tertiary referral center in the Holy capital city of Makkah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ethical approval was obtained from King Abdullah Medical City, Makkah institutional review board that has been accredited by the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Program.

Questionnaire

This was a first study of its kind, hence no validated questionnaire was found following literature research. A group of MMA's and physicians went through the job description of MAA and formulated questions based on this. The final questionnaire consisted of 33 questions with three responses "Yes", "don't know" or "No" with comments and few free text questions (appendix 1).

Respondents

The questionnaire was distributed via hospital e mail and in person to MMA and physicians who were not involved in the development of the questionnaire. No personal details of the respondents were collected apart from position and department.

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3. Results

Overall

Thirty-seven of the hospital staff participated and completed the questionnaire. Of this 19 were physicians and 18 MAA.

Physician response

A total of 19 physicians participated and only 10 mentioned their designation as follows -7 were consultants, 1 associate consultant, 2 assistant consultants. Of those who listed their departments, four were from Digestive and Liver Center, three from ENT, three from CARDIO, one from Head and neck, one from ICU and one from Medicine department.

Of the 33 questions, only two questions were answered 100% correctly. The correct response rate for the remaining questions varied from 11% to 95%. Six of these 33 questions pertained to clinical responsibilities role of MAA and majority of physicians answered incorrectly. Correct response rate for these six questions ranged from as low as 11% to maximum high of 42%. Conversely, nearly 60 to 90% of physician considered MAA to have clinical responsibility too. The remaining 27 questions were related to administrative role of MAA and the correct response rate for these varied from 65% to 100%.

Expectation would be that the physician would identify at least 80% of the role that MAA perform. However, only 11 of the 33 questions scored a response rate of over 80%.

MAA response

18 MAA completed the questionnaire, of these 11 indicated their departments: four were from medical clinical admin, one from specialized surgery, one from oncology, one Cardio. Two from Radiology, one from Medical affairs, one Public health, one from Perioperative department. Only six of the total 33 questions scored 100% correct response. For the remaining 27 questions, the correct response rate varied from 28% to 94%. Of the six questions pertaining to clinical responsibilities only one questions scored a correct response rate of 78%. The remaining five questions correct response rate varied from as low as 28% to maximum high of just 50%. Conversely, nearly 50 to 70% of MAA considered they had clinical responsibility too. For the 27 questions pertaining to administrative role correct response rate varied from 61% to 100%.

Apart from the 33 questions, the MAA were asked to respond on their overall job appreciation and goals. Only 61% to 72% of MAA noticed that they received appreciation, were able to raise issues, had set career goals and could discuss training opportunities to improve performance as detailed below:

“Do you receive appreciation and recognition for your achievements” - 72% said Yes, rest No

“Do you receive appreciation to raise problems and resolve issues arising from your work”
- 61% Yes, rest No

“Do you have set career goals for the future” – 61% Yes, rest No

“Do you discuss training and development opportunities to improve your performance and further your career”
– 61% Yes, rest No

In addition, the MMA were invited to grade their overall job satisfaction. Only a mere 2/18 (11%) were very satisfied with majority 10/18 (56%) being not satisfied and 4/18 (22%) felt job was mediocre.

Some of the comments by MAA:

What achievements have given you the greatest satisfaction? How could they be built on?

- Patient complains tracking sheet - employee database for all staff includes all information
- Employee of the month/ year - motivate you to do your best and to participate, volunteer in different areas or task
- Administration development and building KPI for more efficient work flow
- Rewards- overtime- more teamwork more professionalism
- Appreciation Letter

What challenges have you experienced? How could they be overcome?

- Workload and task variety Fair work distribution and clear job Description
- When some times moving from department to another
- working as multi-tasking - improve your skills and knowledge in different scope
- One Channel communication for all the administration
- Covering other centers - learning to deal with different people and multi tasks

Were there any obstacles that prevented you from achieving your goals? How could they be eliminated?

- Shortage of stuff
- Promotion are on hold - there are no chance and career path of path after job hiring
- currently skill working without fixed office - suggestion: to work together with all staff admins as open office to share more experience
- To be healthy and no time to go to KAMC gym, because I don't have time for break - just keep any office in mind to must have break time
- Needs more training programs and work in team

To improve your overall performance, what could be done by management, yourself or others?

- Monthly meeting to put up goals from month to month - training to improve skills
- Managers monthly meeting to shear obstacle and set improvement plans - training sessions by each staff about his/her best skills to encourage other colleagues
- Systemize all work flow, and transitioning to digital signature
- Clarify the job description to be clear for me and to others

What are your goals?

- The master
- To promoted

- Employee of the year - a leadership position

4. Discussion

The role of MAA is defined in their job description with clarity and lays out both their technical and professional task. The work of the MAA is an integral part of our organization and should receive due admiration and approbation, not just concerning their competency, but also in relation to their suggestions and personal views. Understanding and knowing the role and responsibility of fellow colleagues is important for smooth functioning of a team. This study thus presents data on this matter.

It was worth noting that neither the physician nor the MAA themselves were absolutely certain of the role of MAA. Physicians correctly understood only one third of the role of MAA, scoring above 80% response rate to only 11 questions of the 33. The MAA is required to know her own job better than the physician does and is expected to score above 90% in all questions, however only nine questions attained this score. Hence, the MAA themselves recognized only one third of their role. Though the administrative role of the MAA was well recognized by both the physician and the MAA, the main area of contention was the clinically responsibility. When questioning about the clinical role of MMA, the correct response rate was as low as 11% and 28% amongst the physicians MAA, respectively. This undoubtedly highlighted the misunderstanding of the role of MAA with regard clinical assignment. The very title of MAA clearly limits its role purely to administrative duties. This may be well understood when MAA is working in an exclusive administrative department like human resources or executive administrative office. However, when MAA are assigned to clinical departments, their roles may be muddled with that of a medical secretary. MAA has no training or experience in dealing with patients and their clinical needs. Expecting and assigning them to such tasks understandably exposes them to clinical omissions, which may cost the healthcare system.

Various issues may underpin the lack of understanding of the role of MAA. Inadequate orientation of MAA, dearth of awareness, indifference towards MAA and the greater need to patient’s clinical satisfaction may reinforce this. Good communication and education is the key to promoting better recognition of the MMA activities.

To further understand the MAA’s role, we asked them to comment on their overall job with regard to appreciation, recognition, career goals and satisfaction. Though greater than 70% felt that they were appreciated and had career goals, only around 10% were very satisfied. Some of the

open comments may help realize this. “Promotion on hold”, “shortage of staff”, “workload”, and “covering other centers” may well explain the poor job satisfaction. Solutions again were in the open comments “promotion”, “masters”, “employee of the year” and “leadership”.

Limitations of this study is evidently the modest number, but it captures different departments well and gives a glimpse into the issue. Although much attention is dedicated to research centered on patients, studies like these help to better acknowledge the issues with supporting staff that keep the patient services afloat.

This is the first study of its kind to address the understanding of the role of MAA. We hope that this may help the administration to better design the role of MAA and raise awareness. Given that main misunderstanding of the role of MAA is regarding the clinical tasks, it may be worth considering extending the role of MAA to a medical secretary with appropriate training and financial enumeration.

Statements

Statement of Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from King Abdullah Medical City, Makkah institutional review board that has been accredited by the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Program with a number 22-923 and was given exempt review.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare

Funding Sources

This study was not supported by any sponsor or funder

Author contribution

This study was carried out by the single author mentioned, including all aspects of the study

Data Availability

All data supporting the finding of this study will be made available on reasonable request to the corresponding author

Appendix 1

Physician Questionnaire

While answering reflect on the work of your department secretary

- What do you think are her/his key responsibilities
- Detail any concerns

Position	
Department	
Date	

	Yes	No	Don’t know	Comment
Key responsibilities – duties				
answer the telephone in a courteous and professional manner				
receive and convey messages in writing, verbally and electronically				
liaise with patients and their families in a compassionate manner				

liaise with other health professionals and their staff				
make appointments				
scan and file documents				
prepare documents for mail out				
open, stamp and distribute incoming mail				
type documents as required, with a high level of accuracy				
monitor stationery and/or clinical supplies and place orders as required or directed, maintaining a working supply at all times				
book and organise staff and/or doctors' meetings as directed and document minutes				
participate in ongoing professional development				
contribute equitably to maintaining the cleanliness of the practice				
maintain practice dress standards				
perform other administrative duties as directed by the Practice Manager or Principal Doctor/s.				
Be familiar with medical terminology				
Be proficient in English and Arabic language				
Be proficient in computer office program				
Schedule patients clinic appointment				
Talk to patients over phone				
Ensure patient medical report is prepared on time by physician				
Preparing Administration's records, reports and schedules				
Ensure all documents are recorded in the administrative communication system for efficient follow up				
Perform other duties within scope of responsibilities as assigned by immediate Supervisor				
Liaison departmental physicians and administration				
Help departmental physicians with administrative work				
Work in a team and work with all types of people				
Ensure the computers, printers and other electronic devices are working and in order				
Ensure medical reports and done on time				
Ensure on call rotas are done and are appropriate				
Key responsibilities – safety, quality and culture				
participate in the practice risk management and quality improvement processes				
record incidents and near misses in line with practice policy				
exercise duty of care including meeting practice standards and accountability				
maintain patient and practice confidentiality at all times				
ensure the practice building and work spaces are conducive to a safe and practical work environment				
work to clinical governance processes and standards				
actively contribute to the development of a culture consistent with the values of the practice.				

- Did you receive any information on the role of the department secretary - Yes/ No
- Do you know the job description of the secretary - Yes/ No
- Are you encouraged to discuss your hopes and expectations - Yes/ No

Overall performance

- 1) What achievements of the secretary have given you the greatest satisfaction? Please specify?
- 2) What challenges do you experience with your secretary?
- 3) How can secretary overall performance be improved, what could be done by management, yourself or others?
- 4) How would you rate secretary overall performance?
 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____
 Not satisfactory Average Very satisfactory

Medical Administrative Assistant Questionnaire

While answering reflect on your work

- What do you think are your key responsibilities
- Detail any concerns
- Career goals for the future
- Discuss any support that you receive to achieve your goals (e.g. training).

Position responsible to	
Department	

Date	

	Yes	No	Don't know	Comment
Key responsibilities – duties				
answer the telephone in a courteous and professional manner				
receive and convey messages in writing, verbally and electronically				
liaise with patients and their families in a compassionate manner				
liaise with other health professionals and their staff				
make appointments				
scan and file documents				
prepare documents for mail out				
open, stamp and distribute incoming mail				
type documents as required, with a high level of accuracy				
monitor stationery and/or clinical supplies and place orders as required or directed, maintaining a working supply at all times				
book and organise staff and/or doctors' meetings as directed and document minutes				
participate in ongoing professional development				
contribute equitably to maintaining the cleanliness of the practice				
maintain practice dress standards				
perform other administrative duties as directed by the Practice Manager or Principal Doctor/s.				
Be familiar with medical terminology				
Be proficient in English and Arabic language				
Be proficient in computer office program				
Schedule patients clinic appointment				
Talk to patients over phone				
Ensure patient medical report is prepared on time by physician				
Preparing Administration's records, reports and schedules				
Ensure all documents are recorded in the administrative communication system for efficient follow up				
Perform other duties within scope of responsibilities as assigned by immediate Supervisor				
Liaison departmental physicians and administration				
Help departmental physicians with administrative work				
Work in a team and work with all types of people				
Key responsibilities – safety, quality and culture				
participate in the practice risk management and quality improvement processes				
record incidents and near misses in line with practice policy				
exercise duty of care including meeting practice standards and accountability				
maintain patient and practice confidentiality at all times				
ensure the practice building and work spaces are conducive to a safe and practical work environment				
work to clinical governance processes and standards				
actively contribute to the development of a culture consistent with the values of the practice.				

- Do you receive appreciation and recognition for your achievements - Yes/ No
- Do you receive appreciation to raise problems and resolve issues arising from your work - Yes/ No
- Are you encouraged to discuss your hopes and expectations - Yes/ No
- Do you have set career goals for the future - Yes/ No
- Do you discuss training and development opportunities to improve your performance and further your career - Yes/ No

Overall performance

- What achievements have given you the greatest satisfaction? How could they be built on?
 - What challenges have you experienced? How could they be overcome?
 - Were there any obstacles that prevented you from achieving your goals? How could they be eliminated?
 - Is your job description still current?
 - To improve your overall performance, what could be done by management, yourself or others?
 - What are your goals?
 - How do you see your career developing?
 - How would you rate your overall job satisfaction?
- 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

Not satisfactory Average Very satisfactory

- How would you rate overall performance?
- 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

Not satisfactory Average Very satisfactory

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