

Use Technicians as Physician Assistants

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Meet Your Consultant



Best known as the “Queen of Scripts,” Wendy Myers knows the right words will lead clients to say yes to your medical recommendations, driving patient and practice health. As founder of Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, she teaches practical skills through online courses, onsite and virtual consulting, and conferences. Wendy’s experience as a partner with eight veterinarians in an AAHA-accredited specialty and emergency hospital helped her understand issues that practice owners and managers face. A certified veterinary journalist, she has authored six books and has monthly columns in *Veterinary Practice News* and *dvm360* magazines, ensuring her industry knowledge is relevant for today’s veterinary teams. Learn how Wendy can train your team at csvetscourses.com.

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What you’ll learn:

Learn how to leverage technicians and assistants to work at the top of their licenses and skillsets:

- Identify the type of appointments that technicians and assistants will see
- Understand practice act guidelines on which duties staff may perform
- Create scheduling guidelines for technician appointments
- What hours to offer technician appointments and how to set staff schedules
- How to charge for technician appointments and show value to clients

BONUS: Facilitator’s guide to implement the training

Lessons from physicians on leveraging medical support staff

Despite signing bonuses, student-loan payoff assistance, shortened workweeks, and enticing salaries, private and corporate practice owners are grappling to hire associate veterinarians. Unemployment for veterinarians was 0.5% in 2023.¹ About 4,800 job openings are projected for veterinarians each year.² The U.S. Labor Department forecasts a “faster than average” 19% growth in jobs for veterinarians between 2021 and 2031.

A solution for doctor shortages

Just as physician assistants (PAs) are filling the disparity in human healthcare, veterinarians should consider the same strategy. The Association of American Medical Colleges predicts a shortage of up to 48,000 primary care physicians by 2034.³ Stress and burnout from the pandemic had many quit or choose early retirement.

What PAs do

PAs can provide direct patient care. Specific duties are determined by the supervising physician and state law, but they can provide many of the same services as a primary care physician, including:⁴

- Physical exams
- Making rounds and performing patient exams
- Diagnosing illnesses
- Assisting in surgery
- Ordering and interpreting laboratory tests and X-rays
- Prescribing medications
- Developing and managing treatment plans
- Advising patients on preventative care and optimal health practices

Economics of PAs

Established in 1967, physician assistants are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in every specialty and setting.⁵ About 159,000 PAs across all specialties see an average of 73 patients per week.⁶ To obtain a license, PAs must complete a master's level education at an accredited PA program, pass a certification exam, complete 100 CE hours every two years, and pass a recertification exam every 10 years. About 60% of family physician practices employ PAs and/or nurse practitioners.⁷ PAs earn an average of \$121,530 annually (\$58.43 per hour).⁸ PAs typically generate three to four times their salaries in revenue depending on the practice specialty.⁹

Benefits of PAs

Allows for efficient patient scheduling. The physician and PA work in separate exam rooms at the same time. This allows the practice to see more patients per day. PAs have the clinical expertise to handle most acute and chronic cases, freeing up overscheduled physicians to treat complex cases and critically ill patients.

Expand office hours. A PA can provide patient care and write prescriptions without the physician being present. If a doctor is on vacation or attending a conference, the PA may continue to see appointments and generate revenue for the practice. The PA also may work different hours, expanding availability for patients and providing same-day walk-in care.

Increases procedure and case-management time for doctors. While a PA sees patients, the doctor can spend more time in surgery, attend to hospitalized patients, spend more time on consultations, and provide more follow-up for case management.

Provides medical record and management support. The PA can oversee nurses and other personnel to free up the physician to provide patient care instead of employee management. Getting help with medical record keeping also saves the physician time.

Understand your practice act guidelines on which duties staff may perform

Consult your state's guidelines on technician duties and whether veterinary supervision must be direct or indirect (<https://www.avma.org/advocacy/state-and-local-advocacy/veterinary-state-board-websites>).

The Alabama Practice Act includes veterinary technician license requirements, authorized acts, emergency care, and continuing education (https://asbvme.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Alabama_Practice_Act_and_Administrative_Code_Updated_Working_Copy_2018_3_5_2019.pdf, see page 26). For example, a licensed technician in Alabama may perform dental treatments, induce anesthesia, euthanasia, and suture skin lacerations. An unlicensed assistant may remove sutures, collect and prepare lab specimens, apply bandages, and take diagnostic images.

Identify the type of appointments technicians and assistants will see

With more than 1,000 hospitals in the United States and Canada, Banfield Pet Hospitals initiated technician appointments to streamline patient care and utilize technicians at the top of their skillsets. The corporate group completed more than 30,000 credentialed technician appointments in 2019.¹⁰

Leveraging support staff can have huge financial payoff. A survey found for every credentialed technician that a practice employed, the hospital generated \$161,493 more in gross revenue.¹¹

Evaluate employees' education, experience, and skillsets. The National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America defines a veterinary technician as a graduate from a two-year AVMA accredited college program.¹² Most states require a technician to pass a credentialing exam. On-the-job trained or non-credentialed employees are classified as veterinary assistants.

Review last month's appointment schedule and look for types of appointments that could be shifted to technicians or assistants. You may find 10% to 20% of appointments could be reallocated to medical support staff. If exams are not due, technicians and assistants could administer vaccines, perform lab tests (i.e., drug-monitoring tests for pets taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), conduct follow-up laser therapy treatments, and teach clients how to administer subcutaneous fluids and other home-care lessons. Veterinarians focus on diagnosing, prescribing medications, and performing surgery.

Assign doctor-technician teams by area of responsibility. This helps doctors be more productive and efficient. Pair two technicians with each veterinarian. This medical team of three works in collaboration the entire day and prevents "steal the technician" game among doctors. You will assign technicians and assistants to one of three roles daily:

1. Outpatient technicians/assistants (exams)
2. Inpatient technicians/assistants (treatment area, laboratory, pharmacy, technician appointments)
3. Surgical and dental technicians/assistants (morning procedures, afternoon technician appointments or outpatient exams)

Define a standard of care for the frequency of veterinary exams. Your doctors will need to set a protocol on the frequency of exams for patients to have technicians or assistants deliver specific services. For example, you might require a doctor exam within one year to schedule nursing appointments or to refill medications. In multi-doctor practices, set a "hospital standard of care" rather than individual doctors making their own rules.

Have a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR). Existing clients may schedule nursing appointments while new clients will need appointments with veterinarians first. The American Veterinary Medical Association defines a VCPR with five criteria:¹³

1. The veterinarian has assumed the responsibility for making clinical judgments regarding the health of the patient and the client has agreed to follow the veterinarians' instructions.
2. The veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the patient to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the patient. This means that the veterinarian is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the patient by virtue of a timely examination of the patient by the veterinarian, or medically appropriate and timely visits by the veterinarian to the operation where the patient is managed.
3. The veterinarian is readily available for follow-up evaluation or has arranged for the following: veterinary emergency coverage, and continuing care and treatment.
4. The veterinarian provides oversight of treatment, compliance, and outcome.
5. Patient records are maintained.

Depending on state guidelines, technicians and assistants may perform duties that support veterinarians in five categories:

1) Outpatient exam support: Technicians and assistants may assist veterinarians during outpatient exams. Get patients' vital signs, ask history questions, educate clients, and restrain animals. **Download my history questions for veterinary nurses at <https://csvets.com/historyquestions/>.**

Clients trust veterinarians. When doctors delegate duties to technicians and assistants during outpatient exams, they need to transfer this trust. SAY THIS: *"My technician will give vaccines, share the results of your dog's heartworm-tick test, and refill your preventatives. If you have questions, my technician can provide answers. You're welcome to call, text, or email us. We take a team approach to preventive care. I value the contributions of our nursing team."*

2) Surgical support: Perform dental treatments, suture cutaneous and subcutaneous tissues, assist during surgery, catheterization, prepare surgical site, remove sutures, drains, or staples; administer oxygen therapy, endotracheal intubation, monitor vital signs of anesthetized patients, induce anesthesia, perform dental extractions, and perform local nerve blocks.

3) Treatment support: Enemas, electrocardiography, apply bandages, flush ears, laser therapy, fluid aspiration, application of splints and casts, suture skin lacerations (after veterinarian has examined the wound before and after suturing), resuscitative procedures, application of appropriate wound dressings and external supportive treatment in severe wound and burn cases, administer chemotherapy, and humane euthanasia.

4) Diagnostic support: Laboratory sample collection, run tests, diagnostic imaging (i.e., x-rays, ultrasound), and cystocentesis.

5) Pharmacy support: Administer medications, give injections, dispense medication, administer controlled substances, take patients' vital signs, and restrain animals.

Like PAs, technicians and assistants may see their own appointments. Here are four appointment types:

1) Preventive appointments: Let's say a dog needs a Lyme or Leptospirosis booster vaccine a few weeks after the first dose. Schedule a technician rather than a veterinarian appointment.

2) Diagnostic appointments: Technicians and assistants can collect samples and perform laboratory tests for drug monitoring, early detection screens, preanesthetic testing prior to surgery and dentistry, blood pressure checks, glucose curves, and much more.

3) Treatment appointments: This list is huge. Change bandages, administer subcutaneous fluids, perform laser therapy sessions, trim nails, clean or flush ears, and much more.

4) Instructional appointments: Some puppy and kitten appointments could be delegated to technicians who will give vaccines and focus on educational discussions about nutrition, behavior, parasite protection, potty or litterbox training, and preventive topics. Technicians and assistants could provide coaching for clients with pets on weight-management programs to guide them through feeding and exercise choices. Teach clients about home care from giving insulin injections to subcutaneous fluids.

BONUS TIP: Have clients record videos of patient care they will need to perform at home. Let's say the doctor diagnoses a dog's ear infection. The technician or assistant will demonstrate how to clean the dog's ears and administer medication. Tell the client to record a video on his or her smartphone as you clean the right ear. You'll verbalize instructions while the client zooms in for a closeup of the ear. Have the client stop the recording, put down the smartphone, and now clean the left ear with you as a coach. Clients will better understand homecare instructions when they watch, do it, and have a recording for future reference.

How to charge for technician appointments and show value to clients

Why you should charge for technician appointments

Having clients pay for technician appointments makes sense because:

- Personnel is your practice's top expense, and credentialed technicians earn higher wages than assistants.
- You'll utilize technicians like physician assistants (I guarantee that your physician will charge you for a physician assistant's time and expertise).
- Just like physician assistants or nurse practitioners in human medicine, technicians will get patients' vital signs, ask brief history questions, update medical records, and deliver care.
- You're offering valuable medical services and can serve clients faster (yes, pet owners will pay for convenience).
- You're letting technicians work at the top of their license, improving job satisfaction and employee retention.

To help clients understand the difference between duties performed by a veterinarian and technician, choose different names for the service. Use “exam” when a veterinarian performs a physical exam. Use “health assessment” when a technician or assistant evaluates patient health. The term “health assessment” applies in the human nursing profession.¹⁴ Veterinarians should write technician appointment protocols for which services will need health assessments of patients (i.e., bandage changes).

A health assessment performed by a technician or assistant includes four services:

- 1) Get patient’s vital signs (i.e., temperature, pulse, respiration, weight)
- 2) Ask history questions
- 3) Update medical record
- 4) Deliver care and/or services

Which patients will need health assessments for technician or assistant appointments?

Yes: Perform and charge a health assessment

- Change bandages
- Clean ears
- Anal gland expressions
- Administer subcutaneous fluids
- Laser therapy after initial session
- Booster vaccines
- Weight checks
- Suture removal

No: Health assessment not necessary

- Nail trim
- Collect urine
- Blood draws for lab tests
- Intestinal parasite screen
- Microchipping

What to charge for technician appointments

You can price technician appointments based on a percentage of the doctor’s exam fee or calculate a per-minute rate based on technicians’ average hourly wage including benefits.

Option 1: Percentage of doctor’s exam. Your exam fee is \$60. Charge half the doctor’s rate if a licensed technician provides the health assessment or \$30. If a veterinary assistant delivers services, charge a third of the doctor’s rate or \$20.

Option 2: Create a per-minute rate. You will need to identify three figures:

- **Average hourly wage:** The 2023 average hourly pay for a registered technician was \$21.18, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁵ Veterinary assistants average \$17.94 per hour.¹⁶
- **Benefits:** Benefits are typically 32% of an employee’s wage.¹⁷ Benefit costs include all costs associated with health, dental, worker’s compensation, and other insurances; retirement benefits; the owner’s portion of employment taxes; uniform reimbursement; continuing education; discounts or allowances for veterinary services; and paid vacation, holidays, and personal days.
- **Staff costs as a percentage of revenue:** Total support staff expense with benefits in a financially healthy hospital is 23% to 25% of revenue or less.¹⁸ Support staff includes all non-veterinary employees, managers, and custodial personnel. About 16% to 19% of income is allocated to staff wages while 5% to 8% is for benefits.

Here’s the per-minute formula: Take the average per hour with benefits (\$21.18 technician hourly wage + 32% for benefits = \$27.96 per hour) and divide by 23% staff costs as a percentage of revenue. A technician will need to generate income of \$121.57 per hour to meet profit goals. Divide \$112.48 income

per hour by 60 minutes for a per-minute billable rate of \$2.03 for technician time. Use a similar calculation to determine a per-minute rate for services that veterinary assistants will deliver.

Rather than the tedious task of setting a stopwatch every time a technician sees an appointment, set fees in blocks of 10, 20, 30, and 40 minutes with a minimum amount charged. For example, a 10-minute technician appointment is \$20.20. If the task only takes 5 minutes, still charge the 10-minute technician fee because it's the minimum amount and starting point for fees.

Here are examples of technician appointment fees based on blocks of time:

Length of technician appointment	Health assessment fee
10 minutes	\$20.20
20 minutes	\$40.60
30 minutes	\$60.90
40 minutes	\$81.20

Host a staff meeting before implementing fees so you may explain the “why” behind the charge to employees, and they may answer clients’ fee questions with confidence.

Have technicians and assistants introduce themselves and explain they will perform a health assessment with today’s services. SAY THIS: *“Hello, <client name>. I am <technician name>, a licensed veterinary technician who will change your dog’s bandage today. I also will perform a health assessment to confirm that <pet name>’s wound is properly healing. This health assessment will include getting your pet’s vital signs of temperature, pulse, respiration, and weight; asking you questions about home care, and updating your pet’s medical record. What questions may I answer before we get started?”*

List employees’ names on receipts. Just as you list the doctor’s name on client receipts, include the name of the technician or assistant who delivered care on the invoice. This creates value for professional fees and personalizes the visit because pet owners know exactly who provided care. Use staff ID codes in your practice-management software that have an invoice item description. For example, a client’s receipt would say “Your veterinarian today was Dr. Smith” and “Your veterinary nurse today was Sue.” Besides your hospital logo and contact information, the receipt should list the clinic’s email, number to text, and practice app. These details tell clients how to reach your practice for ongoing communication.

Create scheduling guidelines for technician appointments (includes guidelines to get you started)

Develop scheduling guidelines for technician appointments. During a staff meeting, distribute guidelines so everyone knows which appointment types will be deferred to technicians and assistants (see “Sample Guidelines for Technician Appointments”). Everyone must follow the scheduling guidelines. Imagine four cooks making soup, and no one is using the same recipe—disaster!

Save a PDF of appointment guidelines on every workstation desktop or use software templates based on time and reason for visit. Put a technician column in your schedule just as you have columns for doctor appointments. Designate which inpatient or surgical technician(s) will handle appointments each day. If no technician appointments are booked, employees continue their treatment or surgical duties.

Sample Guidelines for Technician Appointments

Length of exam	Type of appointment
10 minutes	Anal gland expressions Blood draws for drug monitoring, heartworm/tick screening, preanesthetic testing Feline leukemia/FIV test Intestinal parasite screen

20 minutes	Microchipping
	Level 1 nail trims (cooperative patients)
	Suture removal
	Booster vaccines that don't require a doctor's exam (i.e., Bordetella, Lyme, Leptospirosis)
	Weight checks for pets on weight-management programs
	Change bandages
	Clean ears
	Level 2 nail trim (Patient requires two or more nurses/assistants)
	Administer subcutaneous fluids
	Collect urine
30 minutes	Laser therapy after initial session
	Bird grooming
	Scheduled follow-up radiographs

Which hours to offer technician appointments and how to set staff schedules

Set hours for technician appointments. Based on your staffing levels, you may not be able to offer walk-in technician appointments. I advise practice owners and managers to set hours when technician appointments are offered, avoiding the chaos of walk-in technician appointments.

Imagine that you're a surgical technician prepping this morning's patients and three clients walk in for nail trims. If you step away for 30 minutes to do three nail trims, surgery will start late (and you will likely infuriate the doctor). If inpatient or surgical technicians will handle these appointments, offer appointments after surgical procedures are done. For example, have technician appointments between 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. and 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. Survey clients about their preferences for technician appointment times, but most pet owners will want to visit late afternoon (after school) and early evening (after work). Some practices see three to four hours of technician appointments daily. These visits multiply revenue, free up doctor time, and increase employee satisfaction because they're practicing at the top of their licenses or skillsets.

Truly leveraging technicians may cause you rethink your doctor vacancy. If staff see appropriate appointments, you might just need a part-time rather than full-time doctor, or you might be able to hire two technicians instead of a veterinarian.

Which goals will you implement from today's training?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Helpful resources	Link
Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians VTS (Dentistry)	https://www.avdt.us/becomecertified
National Association of Veterinary Technicians	https://www.navta.net
2023 AAHA Technician Utilization Guidelines	https://www.aaha.org/globalassets/02-guidelines/2023-aaha-technician-utilization-guidelines/resources/2023-aaha-technician-utilization-guidelines-new.pdf

Facilitator's Guide: Use Technicians as Physician Assistants and Multiply Your Revenue

Choose a facilitator to lead your team's discussion. Create plans to implement goals you learned in this training program. Consult your state's guidelines on technician duties and whether veterinary supervision must be direct or indirect (<https://www.avma.org/advocacy/state-local-issues/duties-veterinary-technicians-and-assistants>).

1. Which type of appointments could be shifted from veterinarians to technicians and assistants?

Technicians: _____

Assistants: _____

2. Which areas of responsibility (departments) will you assign to technicians/assistants daily?

3. Which hours will you offer technician/assistant appointments? (May vary by weekday.)

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