

Differences between Anesthesiologist Assistants (AAs) and Nurse Anesthetists (NAs) Education and Training

Although both are considered to be equivalent clinical non-physician anesthesia providers and may serve as physician extenders in the delivery of anesthesia, AAs and NAs are very different with regard to their educational background, training pathway and certification process.

Admission Requirements

AA:

- In order to be admitted to an AA program, the applicant must have achieved a bachelor's degree with prescribed prerequisites typical of premedical course work.
- Applicants must then take either the (MCAT) or the (GRE).
- Although many applicants who are from allied health backgrounds such as respiratory therapy and emergency medical technology may have years of clinical experience, a clinical background is not an absolute requirement.
- Nurses who meet the premed coursework prerequisites have been admitted to AA programs.

CRNA:

- According to the Council on Accreditation (COA) of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs, a typical applicant to an NA program must have attained a bachelor's degree in either nursing or another appropriate area.
- Before 1998, applicants with only an associate's degree in nursing were accepted.
- The applicant must be licensed to practice as a registered nurse and take either the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) prior to matriculation.
- One year of nursing experience is required in an "acute care setting".

Educational Programs

AA:

- AA training programs must include a minimum of 24-28 months in a Master's level program accredited by the Commission for the Accreditation of Allied Health Educational Programs (CAAHEP).
- The programs must be based at, or in collaboration with, a university that has a medical school and academic anesthesiologist physician faculty.
- Each AA program must have at least one director that is a licensed, board-certified anesthesiologist. Main clinical sites must be academic medical centers.
- An average of 600 hours of classroom/laboratory education, 2600 hours of clinical anesthesia education, and more than 600 anesthetics administered, including all types of surgery, are typically required to successfully complete AA training.

CRNA:

- NA training programs must include a minimum of 24 months in a Master's level program accredited by the COA. The training programs may be based at any college or university offering a Master's level degree.
- Many nurse anesthetists do not possess a Master's degree as this was not required until 1998 and some do not possess a bachelor degree.
- Nurse anesthetist programs do not require involvement of a medical school or academic physician faculty. Community hospitals may serve as main clinical sites.

- A minimum of 450 hours of classroom/laboratory education, 800 hours of clinical anesthesia education, and administration of 450 anesthetics, including all types of surgery, must be achieved for the student to successfully complete the training program.

Certification Process

AA:

- Upon completion of an accredited AA program, a student may become certified by passing the NCCAA examination. The examination is administered and scored by the National Board of Medical Examiners as part of services contracted to NCCAA. Performance information for test items and the overall exam are provided by NBME.
- NCCAA uses this data to set the passing score and provides notification of certification. NCCAA awards a time-limited certificate to each candidate who successfully completes the Certifying Examination.
- To re-certify, an AA must complete 40 hours of CME every two years and register the activities with NCCAA.
- Additionally, AAs must take the Continuing Demonstration of Qualification Exam every six years.

CRNA:

- Upon completion of an accredited nurse anesthetist program, a student may become certified by passing the Council for Certification of Nurse Anesthetists certification exam. This examination is an adaptive computer examination consisting of 90-160 questions.
- Forty hours of approved Continuing Education Units (CEU) are required every two years in order to recertify. To be recertified, nurse anesthetists are not required to pass any further testing.