Physician scribes improve productivity
Oak Street Medical allows doctors to spend more face time with patients, improve job satisfaction

For the team at Oak Street Medical in Eugene, Ore., adding physician scribes to the staff improved productivity and enhanced quality of life for doctors, says Betty Evans, CMPE, MGMA-ACMPE member.

Initially, the group, which has five primary care doctors, six scribes and five roomers, brought the scribes aboard and charged them with entering patient visit information into computers. Evans, who is the chief executive officer, says the intent was to give doctors more “face time” with patients without increasing costs as the practice grew. As the concept evolved, she realized that scribes and roomers, the latter already on staff, could handle all of the administrative functions associated with patient visits, which allowed doctors to see more patients and spend more quality time with them.

So far it has worked, Evans told attendees at the MGMA 2011 Annual Conference in Las Vegas. Doctors have gone from seeing 18 to 24 patients a day, and they say the use of scribes has increased their quality of life. The staff composition “creates winning teams, and has patients and physicians coming out on top,” Evans says.

Scribes, who must have excellent listening, spelling and typing skills in addition to a working knowledge of medical terminology, can expedite routine intake steps and ensure quality patient care, Evans says, because they allow doctors to focus on patients instead of splitting their time between discussion and data entry. They earn about $16 an hour compared with roomers, who are often recent college graduates and earn about $13 an hour. Physicians regularly meet with their assigned scribes and roomers, and are involved in the hiring process to ensure a good team fit, Evans explains.

Efficient handoff

In Evans’ practice, roomers take vital signs, review medications and document chief complaints or reasons for visits and then hand patients off to scribes, who accompany physicians during patient visits and enter all relevant information into computers. After the visit, roomers ensure that referrals are completed, return visits are scheduled and visit summaries are given to patients.

The practice customized forms for medication, test and lab orders to suit individual physician styles. Scribes are asked to memorize the forms to expedite data entry and ensure accuracy.

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While improving patient care and reducing costs were the initial goals of hiring physician scribes, doctors at Oak Street Medical sing their praises for more than those reasons.

Their focus on data entry and record completion also helps the practice earn meaningful use incentive payments from the government.

Three years after adding scribes, the practice continues to refine the position. “It’s been an evolution for us,” says Evans. “We have been able to shift some responsibilities to roomers.” For example, roomers now follow up on open orders and ensure that test results from referral appointments have been received and logged into patient records.

Scribes are paired with doctors, depending on physician productivity. High-performing doctors who see 35 to 40 patients a day have dedicated scribes; others share scribes. One doctor has two scribes. In addition to handling all of the data entry, scribes help ensure that doctors and the group’s one registered nurse focus on tasks that require medical licenses.

Evans cited MGMA survey data to highlight her group’s efficient staffing ratios. Data from the Cost Survey for Multispecialty Practices: 2011 Report Based on 2010 Data show that multispecialty groups have a median support staff ratio of 5.31 employees to each full-time-equivalent physician. Oak Street’s ratio is 4 to 1.

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“Where I came from, I worked from morning until night and could only see a maximum of 18 patients a day,” says Shehzad Jinnah, MD. “Using the scribe system, I can see 22 to 24 patients a day. I am done on time and have my evenings to spend with my daughter.”

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