

Allocation of Physician Time in Ambulatory Practice: A Time and Motion Study in 4 Specialties

ONLINE FIRST

Christine Sinsky, MD; Lacey Colligan, MD; Ling Li, PhD; Mirela Prgomet, PhD; Sam Reynolds, MBA; Lindsey Goeders, MBA; Johanna Westbrook, PhD; Michael Tutty, PhD; and George Blike, MD

[\[+\] Article, Author, and Disclosure Information](#)

See Also:

[Electronic Health Records: An Unfulfilled Promise and a Call to Action](#)

Ann Intern Med. Published online 6 September 2016 doi:10.7326/M16-0961

© 2016 American College of Physicians

Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

Article

Tables

References

Supplements

Comments (4)

Background: Little is known about how physician time is allocated in ambulatory care.

Objective: To describe how physician time is spent in ambulatory practice.

Design: Quantitative direct observational time and motion study (during office hours) and self-reported diary (after hours).

Setting: U.S. ambulatory care in 4 specialties in 4 states (Illinois, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Washington).

Participants: 57 U.S. physicians in family medicine, internal medicine, cardiology, and orthopedics who were observed for 430 hours, 21 of whom also completed after-hours diaries.

Measurements: Proportions of time spent on 4 activities (direct clinical face time, electronic health record [EHR] and desk work, administrative tasks, and other tasks) and self-reported after-hours work.

Results: During the office day, physicians spent 27.0% of their total time on direct clinical face time with patients and 49.2% of their time on EHR and desk work. While in the examination room with patients, physicians spent 52.9% of the time on direct clinical face time and 37.0% on EHR and desk work. The 21 physicians who completed after-hours diaries reported 1 to 2 hours of after-hours work each night, devoted mostly to EHR tasks.

Limitations: Data were gathered in self-selected, high-performing practices and may not be generalizable to other settings. The descriptive study design did not support formal statistical comparisons by physician and practice characteristics.

Conclusion: For every hour physicians provide direct clinical face time to patients, nearly 2 additional hours is spent on EHR and desk work within the clinic day. Outside office hours, physicians spend another 1 to 2 hours of personal time each night doing additional computer and other clerical work.

Primary Funding Source: American Medical Association.