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Title

Time Well Spent: The Effect of Protected Time to Bill for Patient Portal Messages on Productivity, Patient Access, and Physician Well-being in an Academic Primary Care Office

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Background

Multiple recent studies show that rising electronic medical record (EMR) inbox volume among primary care physicians increases total work hours and negatively impacts wellness and work-life balance. New CMS billing rules now permit reimbursement for select patient portal messages.

Objective

This study evaluated whether allocating protected time during clinic sessions to manage inbox tasks affects reimbursement, patient access, documentation efficiency, and physician well-being.

Data and Methods

Eleven family medicine physicians were randomly selected to participate. Over a three-month period (September 1–December 1, 2025), 30 minutes of each four-hour clinic session was designated as protected time for EMR-related tasks at the physician's discretion. Participants received individualized EMR setup, workflow optimization, and training on appropriate billing for patient portal messages.

Results

Following the intervention, billed patient portal messages increased by 528%, and total three-month reimbursement increased by 2.03% year-over-year. There was no statistically significant improvement in same-day note closure or message turnaround time. Post-intervention feedback indicated increased physician comfort with billing patient portal encounters. Physicians reported reduced after-hours work, earlier clinic departure times, more consistent lunch breaks, decreased stress, improved well-being, and reduced overall work hours. Access-related outcomes are still under analysis.