Time Is Everything

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The most precious asset of a medical practice is *your provider's time.* The provider's time represents a non-inventoriable resource, and it's critical to make the most of it. Yet most providers struggle with efficiently moving through the day, often left with significant piles of work at day's end. The electronic world has made these "piles" even more hefty than the physical stacks of work that historically adorned desks. Consider embracing an efficiency tip:

Cautiously leverage your "free" employee (the patient). Encourage patients to participate in their own care, ideally collecting data directly from them. This may include, but not be limited to, past family social history, history of present illness, and current medications. Engage your care team in connecting with patients to determine and document other essential elements, including vitals. Encourage your care team to think of an outpatient encounter like an operating room – the patient should be prepped and ready for the provider when they "scrub" into the exam room.

***Perform a morning huddle and an afternoon sweep*.** Both are brief touch-base meetings to prepare for the day – and the next. Incorporate a two-minute debrief on what didn't go so well that day, reflecting on mistakes or challenges, gathering suggestion(s) from the whole team. Preparing for the day – and encouraging improvement – are the best long-term investments a practice can make to boost efficiency.

Tame the inbox**.** The volume of messages has surged in recent years, adding to the challenges related to provider burnout. Train care teams and provide appropriate protocols and guidance that will allow them to scrub messages before they hit a provider's inbox. Messages should be considered a care team responsibility, not a personal message to the provider. Via EHR system settings, establish a minimum-allowed character for messages, auto-sunset messages over a certain age, and carefully purge "thank you" responses. Establish accountability for every inbox, including monitoring the message turnaround time by staff member.

Manage prescriptions**.** Recognize the symbiotic nature of medications and your collective practice efforts. When medications run out, action is required. Therefore, consider a standard refill reminder for practice staff to proactively schedule patients before renewals are due. Synchronize routine medications on a single annual (or quarterly, as clinically appropriate) visit.

Route normal test results**.** Unless a provider chooses otherwise, send normal test results directly to the patient portal for patients who are confirmed to use the portal. For those who haven't been verified as portal users, normal results should be mailed. Arrange for pre-visit tests (and address other pertinent care gaps) that can be anticipated, reviewing results during the encounter.

Pre-visit planning**.** Instruct your care teams to review patients' charts in advance of the visit; consider a checklist based on the provider's expectations. For example, the team may review for any intra-visit messages, referrals that were placed, and the results of testing that was ordered.

Evaluate your staff's responsibilities**.** The role of the office-based medical assistant has evolved into a multi-faceted position streamlining the flow of information between patient and providers, who need to respond proactively. Consider role-playing the following scenarios: message-taking, working through conflict within a team, collecting medications, and managing a refill, referral, or test result. The mock trial need not be perfect, but it's important to recognize that the role of the care team is changing. Delegate, delegate, delegate!

Mastering the art of working intelligently can enhance the practice's efficiency, but it takes effort. Leaning into time management may be the most important investment a provider make into a medical practice.

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