

Scribe Solutions Free Docs to Spend More Time With Complex Patients

By Andrea Caliri, M.D.

What makes a physician's day so stressful is that it can be entirely unpredictable. There is the patient who comes in for strep throat and mentions that her left hand has been numb and tingling. In the schedule, this appears like it will be a fast and easy exam. In reality, the doctor has to now address multiple other concerns. This is the nature of medicine. It is also what makes seeing patients, developing relationships and providing care so rewarding.

Most physicians became physicians because they enjoy helping patients, solving problems and developing relationships. The problem arises when the time to accomplish the very things that will benefit the patient and provide satisfaction for the provider is limited. All professionals have to deal with time constraints – there is never enough time to prepare for meetings, finish reports or attend to daily problems. In medicine, this is of particular concern because if the patient feels rushed or not listened to, their care may be suboptimal. Physicians deal with personal, delicate matters with patients who are worried about what is most important to them – their health. It is imperative that the physician has the time to make the patient feel comfortable and heard; and it takes time to build this rapport.

Physician work hours have grown longer and longer, while each patient visit is shorter and shorter. This is a result of increased documentation requirements, the electronic medical record (EMR), decreasing reimbursements and government regulations. In addition, many physicians have noted that the patients they see are also more complex, possibly due to the more straight-forward issues being handled by non-physician practitioners and urgent care centers.

Using a medical scribe is one solution to free up doctors so they can spend more time with patients. Atul Gawande notes that medical scribes can be beneficial to many practices. He stated, "We replaced paper with computers because paper was inefficient. Now computers have become inefficient. So, we're hiring more humans. And it sort of works." It does seem wasteful that physicians, with years of training and significant knowledge, spend more than 50% of their time documenting. A medical scribe is an excellent tool to cut down on physician documentation so doctors can spend more time with complex patients. In fact, using a scribe often results in physician notes being pretty much completed by the end of the visit and

decreases average visit times from 16 minutes to less than 12 minutes. This allows physicians to be on time for patients and leave the office on time. The physician can spend at least four minutes more with each patient while not having to stay after hours to complete notes. Even more importantly, the physician no longer has to spend “pajama time” at home to finish documentation.

Being able to spend more time with the patients who need it is potentially the biggest advantage of a scribe. We became docs to care for the whole patient – to understand their lives, families and stresses in order to provide complete care. While a few minutes more with each patient may seem insignificant, in reality, it is very significant for the patient. The patient and the physician will no longer feel rushed or pressured to “finish up”. When the physician has time to educate the patient it is rewarding for both parties. Taking the time to review the patient’s lifestyle choices, stressors, exercise routines and diet, can have a big impact on patient health. When the physician has the time to know the patient, the patient will be more likely to follow-up appropriately and feel heard.

I recently worked with a physician who had more than 300 backlogged charts. After spending a few days with him I understood why. As a specialist, all of his patients are complex. He is a compassionate, attentive physician who spends a lot of time with every patient. What he did not do was complete his charts. In the moment, his care was excellent and the patients felt cared for. The problem is that the documentation is necessary. It is not only bad for billing, coding and regulation but it is bad for the patient. When the patient returns or sees another physician, the incomplete documentation is an impediment to patient care. This physician chose to concentrate on the patient-physician relationship to the detriment of documentation. Many physicians opt for better documentation over the rewarding relationship with patients. Utilizing a scribe, this physician continued to spend significant time with patients but now with the added benefit of having his documentation completed before the patient left the office.

Today’s medical scribing solutions are relatively easy to implement, support the clinical workflow, can be tailored to physician preferences (physical, virtual or dictation to text scribing) and can generate revenue for the practice. A medical scribe can be a valuable solution to the time constraints that force physicians to choose between the patient relationship and documentation. In addition to having more time with complex patients, physicians can opt to delve more deeply into patient concerns, mental health issues, addiction issues and preventive care. After all, isn’t that why many of us went into medicine in the first place?

About Andrea Caliri, M.D.

Dr. Caliri is an OB/GYN who serves as MindLeaf’s medical consultant for the company’s medical scribing services. She is an industry thought leader on the topic of engaging physicians and medical practices in medical scribing solutions that help reduce their clinical documentation workload to increase physician satisfaction and practice revenue.