

U.S. Doctors' Admin Costs Quadruple Canadians'

BY JANE ANDERSON

FROM HEALTH AFFAIRS

Physician practices in the United States spend four times as much money as do those in Ontario, Canada, to cope with paperwork and communications involving health insurers and payers, according to a study.

The investigators found that U.S. medical practices spend nearly \$83,000 per year per physician to deal with health plans. In contrast, practices in Ontario spend about \$22,200 to interact with Canada's single-payer health care system.

"If U.S. physicians had similar administrative costs to Ontario physicians, the to-

tal savings would be approximately \$27.6 billion per year," wrote Dr. Dante Morra of the University of Toronto, and his colleagues (Health Aff. August 2011 [doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2010.0893]).

Most of the problems U.S. physicians face relate to the fact that they're trying to cope with multiple payers, while Canadian physicians must deal with only one, said Dr. Morra and colleagues, who added that U.S. insurers could help by taking steps to improve the efficiency of transactions, such as implementing electronic transactions.

U.S. physicians spent an average of 3.4 hours per week interacting with multiple insurers, while Canadian physicians

spent an average of 2.2 hours per week dealing with that country's single payer. The main difference in time is the 1 hour per week that U.S. physicians spent obtaining prior authorizations, which accounted for most of the difference in the results, the study said.

In addition, practice staff members in the United States spent far more time on insurance issues than did their Canadian peers, according to the study. U.S. nursing staff, including medical assistants, spent 20.6 hours per physician in the practice per week interacting with payers, nearly 10 times the 2.5 hours per week spent by Ontario nursing staff.

The study found that the U.S. nursing

staff members spent more time in every possible category, including prior authorizations, which cost them 13.1 hours per physician in the practice per week. In Canada, nursing staff members spent no time on prior authorizations.

Clerical staff members worked 53.1 hours per physician per week in the United States, mainly on billing issues and obtaining prior authorizations, the study said. Meanwhile, clerical staff members in Canada worked only 15.9 hours per week, and only on claims and billing issues.

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