

# Primary Care Pay Lowest Among Specialties

BY JANE ANDERSON

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF  
INTERNAL MEDICINE

Primary care physicians receive the lowest reimbursement of all physician specialties, indicating a need for reforms that would increase incomes or reduce work hours for these physicians.

J. Paul Leigh, Ph.D., and his colleagues at the University of California, Davis, used data from 6,381 physicians provid-

ing patient care in the 2004-2005 Community Tracking Study.

Medical specialties were broken down into four broad categories: primary care, comprising physicians who provide general primary care; surgery; internal medicine subspecialists and pediatric subspecialists; and an "other" category with physicians practicing in areas such as radiation oncology, emergency medicine, ophthalmology, and dermatology.

Wages of procedure-oriented special-

ists were approximately 36%-48% higher than those of primary care physicians, the investigators found.

Specifically, specialties with statistically higher-than-average wages perform neurologic, orthopedic, or ophthalmologic surgery, use sophisticated technologies such as radiation oncology equipment, or administer expensive drugs such as oncology drugs in office settings, they found.

Lower-paid specialties, meanwhile, were

largely nonprocedural and relied instead on talking to and examining patients, they noted, adding that "the major exception is critical-care internal medicine."

Wages per hour for primary care physicians were about \$61, while surgeons earned about \$90 per hour and other procedure-oriented specialties earned close to \$88 per hour. Internal medicine subspecialists and pediatric subspecialists, meanwhile, earned just over \$82 per hour (Arch. Intern. Med. 2010;170:1728-34). ■

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