

# Zero Wait Time—An Attainable Goal

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**W**hat can we do to get even better?" This is a common question asked by office managers, technicians, front office staff, and ophthalmologists alike. An obvious area to address is patient satisfaction. While a majority of patients are generally satisfied with their physician and the overall care received there is always room for improvement. In many offices a great deal of time and attention is given to surgical outcomes, chart documentation, compliance, and billing accuracy. These are all necessary areas to monitor and ultimately improve overall patient satisfaction.

An area that often is overlooked, however, is how long a patient waits to be seen after checking in. In fact, patient wait time after check-in often tops the list of patient complaints.

Addressing patient wait time begins with monitoring. The latency from when a patient checks in until when a technician sees the patient should be monitored over time. Minor adjustments to clinic flow and the way patients are seen can result in major changes to the delivery of care.

## Track wait-time

The first step in the process of reducing patient wait time is to document the average wait time in the clinic. This can be documented and tracked in various ways.

If a clinic is documenting patient encounters on paper, then additional fields can be created to track patient time through the clinic. In this system, all individuals who touch the chart—the chart-check-in receptionist, technician, and physician/scribe—will fill in the time they interacted with the patient.

If the clinic is using electronic records, this data often can be gleaned directly from the system by use of time-stamped signatures and/or contribution lists. The time-study data might include the time of patient check-in, the time the chart is available for a technician, the time the visit is started by a technician, the time the provider starts to see the patient, the time the provider encounter ends, and/or the patient check-out time. Once these times are known, the patient visit can quickly be broken down into smaller time frames, such as time from check-in to exam start, duration of tech work-up, how long the patient waits to see the physician after being worked up, and the overall time of a patient visit.

Clinics should evaluate the average wait time as well as the range (standard deviation) to better understand how long patients wait to be seen in each portion of the exam. This information can be used to decrease wait

time for patients and also to monitor technician and physician productivity.

## Improve technician/provider efficiency

As noted above, time study data can be used to assess technician and provider efficiency. Clinics could monitor mean work-up times, turnaround times, and the number of patient workups performed by each individual each week. These data should be shared with each individual providing patient care.

In addition to sharing that individual's data, the clinic should also share summaries of peer data (de-personalized) for a source of comparison. Most clinics have a standard for exam work-up times and such data will allow individuals to see how well they compare to this standard and to their peers. If any individual's times are significantly longer than their peers and the clinic standard, then this can be addressed on an individual basis, for example by providing training on strategies to enhance efficiency without compromising quality. If providers often produce wait times significantly longer than the clinic standard then it will be important to determine the reason(s) for this discrepancy. Two possible causes of long wait times are lack of available rooms and competing technician duties.

One highly effective strategy for decreasing wait times has to do with how rooms are allocated. Even the most productive and efficient technician can do nothing if she does not have a room available to work with patients. Therefore, clinic flow is greatly improved if each technician has his own room to work up patients. The best scenario is to have dedicated technician work-up rooms and a couple of rooms dedicated to each provider. This will allow for a continual availability of work-up rooms and decrease the need for provider-specific equipment in every room. Of course, this model requires someone to move patients from a common waiting area to the provider rooms. This can

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be accomplished by scribes or a dedicated employee whose job duties include expediting patient flow through the clinic.

A second strategy to decrease wait times is to ensure that technicians are focused on seeing patients during busy clinic times. This may sound obvious, but technicians are constantly faced with distractions from fellow technicians, the front desk, ringing phones, other responsibilities, etc. Technicians should be told that the priority during busy times is to see patients in the office and that other duties can wait. Some technicians initially might need help managing their time in this way, as they might struggle to determine what is the biggest priority.

In addition, front desk staff should be taught how to determine when a phone call or overhead page is needed versus taking a message that can be addressed when clinic volume is lower.

## Implementation example

In my clinic, our director of clinical operations, Tony Reynolds, COT, OCS, successfully achieved a zero wait time goal. This goal was achieved over a period of 3 months and the clinic began with an average wait time of 25 minutes.

"To us zero wait time means we are able to provide quality care and on-time appointments, and thrive economically. In order for a goal as lofty as this one to work you'll need a few things to happen," Reynolds said. "First and foremost the doctors/owners have to be fully committed to and unified about achieving zero wait times for their patients. Your next step is to look for your point person. That person needs to be experienced in all aspects of clinical operations and trusted and respected by the doctors, administration, front office, and technical staff in order to succeed. The point person needs to be honest, straightforward and respectful in all his/her communications. He/she needs to be detailed oriented, resourceful and be able to multitask—but above all, ... fully invested in the idea of zero wait time." **AE**



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