

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

Patient Census: Rabbit Season or Duck Season - Understand Changes in Patient Demand

Demand may fluctuate, but understanding the patterns helps you cope

So you have a pretty good idea of how many patients want an appointment in your practice on a particular day. Life would be so simple if that number stayed exactly the same year-round, wouldn't it?

Unfortunately, life isn't that straightforward. In the real world, there are all kinds of fluctuations in patients' demand for your services. There may be changes week to week, but the biggest change will be over seasons.

To account for seasonal variations, you simply keep tracking over a long term, says **Catherine Tantau** with Tantau & Associates in Grass Valley, Calif. Especially if you can track how many patients call for appointments versus how many patients leave your office with an appointment already scheduled, you can draw a pretty good picture.

Once you gather more data, you may find some surprising facts, like the fact that "flu season" is a myth for many practices, Tantau says. In fact, patients who call in November and December often receive appointments in January and February because so many staffers take vacations at the end of the year.

"So what we're doing is putting a flu season on top of work that would have gotten done in November and December," Tantau says. For many practices that have figured this out, "flu season is a non-event."

People in Florida will have surges in demand as "snowbirds" move south for the winter, while people in Washington will see migrant farm workers coming through, Tantau says.

You should also track demand by day of the week. If your highest demand day is Monday, then it doesn't make sense to let two of your physicians have Monday as their day off, Tantau says.