

## Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

### Studies & Surveys: Physicians Capacity at the Breaking Point, Study Says, Medicare Patients Wait Longer for Fewer Services

Patients are waiting longer for appointments, and doctors don't have enough time with each patient.

That's the gist of a new study from the Washington-based **Center for Studying Health System Change**, "So Much to Do, So Little Time: Physician Capacity Constraints." Even though the supply of doctors has increased slightly and doctors are spending more of their time on patient care than in the past, signs are that doctors don't have enough time to treat patients.

Physicians spent two more hours per week on patient care in 2001 compared with 1997. And the proportion of their time physicians spent directly on patient care increased from 81 percent to 86 percent in that period.

But 34 percent of physicians felt they didn't have enough time with patients in 2001, up from 28 percent in 1997.

The Center offers a few possible reasons for this time squeeze:

1. Physicians have more diagnostic and treatment options, so it all takes longer
2. Managed-care plans have eased up tight restrictions, so patients can go see the doctor more easily
3. People with chronic illnesses are living longer, and these diseases may require more complex coordination
4. Doctors are supposed to provide a longer and longer list of preventive services.

The study also said fewer physicians are willing to accept every new Medicare patient who shows up, down from 73 percent to 69 percent. But practices also employed more nurse practitioners and other nonphysician practitioners. And the number of visits to a doctor's office per person remained constant every year from 1997 to 2001.

Editor's note: the study is at <http://www.hschange.com/CONTENT/556/>