

Eli's Rehab Report

Reader Question: On-call Psychiatrist

Question: If our psychiatrist is on call for another group and he sees a patient for the first time, do we bill a new patient visit or an established patient visit?

New Mexico Subscriber

Answer: Because the psychiatrist has not seen the patient before, he may have to perform a more extensive exam of the patient than the patient's regular physician might have. For that reason, many coders erroneously believe that on-call services warrant billing initial hospital care (99221-99223) or initial inpatient consultation (99251-99255) codes. But CPT 2001 states, In the instance where a physician is on call for or covering for another physician, the patient's encounter will be classified as it would have been by the physician who is not available. Therefore, if you are checking on a patient who was admitted by another doctor, you would bill the subsequent hospital care codes (99231-99233).

The on-call psychiatrist can bill for an initial inpatient consultation only if the patient was referred directly to him and he was the admitting physician. In addition, the visit would have to meet all the criteria of a consult (request for consultation, review of the patient, report back to the referring physician).

The only exception to the on-call billing rule occurs when the on-call psychiatrist is visiting a patient during the postsurgical global period. In that case, no billing should occur at all. To get paid for such on-call services, you either can work out an arrangement with the practice for whom you are on call, or trade services on a quid-pro-quo basis, which works well for many practices.