

University of Colorado APEX Team Care Project

Summary by Dike Drummond MD, CEO TheHappyMD.com

In 2015, the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Colorado health system instituted a team based model called ambulatory process excellence, or APEX.

Under this system, medical assistants gather data, reconcile medications, set the agenda for patient visits, and identify opportunities to increase preventive care. After they complete this structured process, they share this information with a physician or nurse practitioner and remain in the room to document the visit. When the clinician leaves, the medical assistant provides patient education and health coaching.

This arrangement allows physicians and midlevel clinicians to focus on synthesizing data, performing the physical exam, and making medical decisions without distractions.

“The chaos in exam rooms before APEX was akin to texting while driving,”

Lyon warns that launching APEX required work. Although the program increased the ratio of medical assistants to clinicians from 1:1 to 2.5:1, it required more than simply adding people. APEX required rigorous training for medical assistants, the development of structured protocols to allow them to function semi-independently, and new communication systems. Most of all, Lyons believes, the implementation succeeded because of flexibility and teamwork: “Providers have to be willing to give up a little control to get the support they need so that they can build better connections with patients without technology interfering.”

Within 6 months after the APEX launch,

- Burnout rates among clinicians dropped from 53% to 13%.
- There was also an improvement in the practice’s pneumococcal vaccination rates and patient referrals for mammography and colonoscopy screening tests.
- With increased efficiency, the practice was able to add nearly three extra patients per doctor per day and reduce waiting times for new patients who wanted to join the practice
- With increased provider productivity, APEX remained cost-neutral

The University of Colorado health system plans to expand the program to six additional family medicine, internal medicine, and primary care clinics.

NEJM Perspective: Beyond Burnout — Redesigning Care to Restore Meaning and Sanity for Physicians
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