

Advanced access: reducing waiting and delays in primary care.

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Reducing Waiting and Delays in Primary Care

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Abstract

Delay of care is a persistent and undesirable feature of current health care systems. Although delay seems to be inevitable and linked to resource limitations, it often is neither. Rather, it is usually the result of unplanned, irrational scheduling and resource allocation. Application of queuing theory and principles of industrial engineering, adapted appropriately to clinical settings, can reduce delay substantially, even in small practices, without requiring additional resources. One model, sometimes referred to as *advanced access*, has increasingly been shown to reduce waiting times in primary care. The core principle of advanced access is that patients calling to schedule a physician visit are offered an appointment the

same day. Advanced access is not sustainable if patient demand for appointments is permanently greater than physician capacity to offer appointments. Six elements of advanced access are important in its application

balancing supply and demand, reducing backlog, reducing the variety of appointment types, developing contingency plans for unusual circumstances, working to adjust demand profiles, and increasing the availability of bottleneck resources. Although these principles are powerful, they are counter to deeply held beliefs and established practices in health care organizations. Adopting these principles requires strong leadership investment and support.

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