

Admitting versus Attending Physicians: Differing Classifications Affect Clinical Documentation and Workflows

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Understanding an organization's physician classifications is important. Physician classifications drive documentation requirements such as history and physicals, consultation reports, and discharge summaries. In addition, physician classifications often outline the extent of direct patient care a physician has.

Two important classifications are admitting and attending physicians.

The Admitting Physician

Admitting physicians are credentialed by the healthcare organization to have admitting privileges. Admitting privileges are granted by the governing board to a clinical care provider to provide direct patient care within the hospital. Admitting privileges are different from clinical privileges, which are defined by the care provider's license, experience, and competencies.

An admitting physician is the clinical provider responsible for admitting the patient to the hospital. The admitting physician is responsible for certain documentation such as accurately identifying the:

- Date of admission
- Chief complaint
- Admitting diagnosis
- Written admission order

Only one clinical provider can be designated as the admitting physician and bill for an inpatient encounter using the CPT initial hospital care codes (99221–99223). If two or more physicians are involved in the care of a patient, one must be identified as the admitting physician, and the remaining physicians considered consultants.

Physicians may be granted emergency admitting and clinical privileges. These emergency privileges are granted by the governing board, chief of staff, or the hospital's chief executive officer. These appointments are made in emergency situations and can be made without regard to the care provider's regular service assignment or status.

Take for example a hospital that has a neurosurgeon on staff who dies of a sudden illness. The chief of staff could extend emergency admitting privileges to a second neurosurgeon to provide coverage until a replacement is located.

Physicians may also be granted temporary admitting and clinical privileges. These temporary privileges are granted by the organizational designee such as the chief of staff or chief executive officer. Temporary privileges are granted for a specified time period.

For example, physicians on an organ donation procurement team may not be members of the regular medical staff but may be given temporary admitting and clinical privileges to perform organ-harvesting activities.

The Attending Physician

An attending physician, also called a staff physician, is a clinical provider who has completed a residency program and practices within a clinic or hospital. Attending physicians usually supervise other clinical providers such as fellows, residents,

and medical students within an academic medical center. They have the final legal responsibility for the quality of patient care and documentation provided during the inpatient visit.

In some instances attending physicians may still be receiving training, as is the case with fellows. For example, a cardiology fellow may continue to function as an internal medicine attending because he or she has already completed his or her residency in internal medicine.

The use of the term attending physician is most often found in academic medical centers or teaching hospitals, wherein the attending physician:

- Supervises the overall patient care provided
- Holds a faculty appointment
- Provides clinical teaching responsibilities

In nonacademic medical centers the admitting and attending physician is often considered one in the same.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services defines an attending physician in 42 CFR 418.3 as a "doctor of medicine or osteopathy legally authorized to practice medicine and surgery by the State in which he or she performs that function or action or nurse practitioner who meets the training, education, and experience requirements described in 42 CFR 410.75."

An attending physician who has admitting privileges can serve as an admitting physician. For example, a cardiology attending physician who oversees the cardiology residency program can be credentialed through the governing board to also admit patients to the cardiology service.

Depending on the organization, a radiology attending physician may or may not have admitting privileges, which would determine whether he or she could serve as an admitting physician. The radiology physician is an attending physician as he or she oversees radiology residents and provides teaching responsibilities. An organization's medical staff bylaws may distinguish that this particular clinical service does not admit patients.

Understanding the physician's role in the care of the patient will ensure effective workflows between the health information staff and physicians. For example, assigning chart deficiencies and coding queries are determined based on the physician's role. Ensuring health information is completed timely and accurately is crucial for ensuring patient safety.

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