Reviewer's report

Title: Following the Money: Copy-Paste of Lifestyle Counseling Documentation and Provider Billing

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Reviewer: Mark Unruh

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“Following the Money: Copy-Paste of Lifestyle Counseling Documentation and Provider Billing”

The authors have chosen an interesting and timely topic. Given the nation’s investment in health information technology, it is important to evaluate its potential impact on the cost and quality of care. However, there are a number of places where the manuscript could be strengthened. My comments follow:

Major comments

1. A more detailed description of the EMR would be useful. For example, does it have structured fields (i.e. check boxes, drop-down menus, etc.) that could be used to justify higher E & M charges?

2. How do the notes relate to charges? A description of the process by which charges are derived would be very helpful. For example, is documentation of the encounter reviewed and coded by staff that handle billing?

3. Page 5: The study cohort excluded patients who had more than one encounter with an endocrinologist. Is it possible that some study participants saw physicians not affiliated with BWH or MGH?

4. Page 9: How was time spent on counseling defined? For example, was is simply the number of minutes, or was it a binary indicator reflecting whether it was long enough for higher E & M charges (in conjunction with lifestyle counseling)?

5. The use of average measurements for missing values is noted on page 9. This should be explained in much more detail. How many observations were missing for each variable? Were there indications that the pattern of missingness was systematic (significant estimates were found for “BP imputed” in Table 4)?

6. It would be helpful to divide Table 1 in a way such that it shows differences between patients/encounters with “copy and paste” and those without indications if it.

7. A table and discussion of physician characteristics would be informative. For example, did treatment patterns among physicians who were more likely to use the copy and paste function differ from those of other physicians? Were there other differences in the characteristics of physicians such as age, experience, etc?
8. Related to the comment above, how were physicians compensated? Those not on salary may have had a stronger incentive to justify higher E & M charges. Also, since there are multiple payers, a sub-analysis with a group covered by an insurer that has higher reimbursements for E & M would be informative (e.g. Medicare FFS). For example, there may be a lack of a financial incentive to inflate charges if a patient is covered by a managed care plan.

9. It’s noted on page 10 that 51.1% of encounters were billed at “level 4 E & M charges.” This should be defined (e.g. Is level 4 the highest payment category? Do all payers use this coding?).

Minor comments

10. The unit of analysis is described on page 6, and again on page 8. This is a bit confusing. I would recommend taking out the description on page 6.

11. The description of the analysis for time to glycemic control should be discussed earlier in the paper. There’s no mention of it until page 8. The abstract and introduction only indicate an examination of the association between “copy and paste” and E & M charges.

Discretionary comments

12. I would recommend dropping “Following the Money” from the title.

13. Middle of page 8: I would recommend spelling out “3SD” for clarity instead of abbreviating it.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests