



Silent Partners

Medical scribes are an integral part of the emergency medicine team at the University of Florida.

By Erika D. Peterman

During his emergency medicine residency, it was common for Brandon Allen, M.D., to spend hours charting after his shifts in the University of Florida Emergency Department ended. He might have been scheduled to finish at 3 p.m., but in reality it was more like 6 p.m. by the time he finished entering his notes.

Today, Dr. Allen oversees a program at UF that has shifted the ED landscape in more ways than one. The Department of Emergency Medicine [Scribe Program](#), implemented in March 2013, has not only led to measurable improvements in the patient experience but also reduced the burden on physicians and allowed them to give more attention to their patients. And thanks to the scribe program, ED physicians are now spending an hour or less on charting at the end of their shifts instead of two to three hours.

Nationally, the demand for medical scribes has increased as more and more physicians convert from paper to EHRs. According to a Fortune magazine article, the American College of Medical Scribe Specialists projects that the number of scribes will rise from 20,000 currently to 100,000 by 2020.

While medical scribes have long been fixtures in emergency rooms, the scribe program at UF stands out because it is a homegrown solution that doesn't rely on an outside contractor. The scribes are all UF undergraduate and recent post-graduate, pre-medicine students. With a large sector of students who

are pre-medicine or majoring in science fields, UF is fertile ground for such a program. The only other such program to be established prior to UF's is at the University of Virginia, where the Department of Emergency Medicine launched its scribe program in 2007.

Analogous to court reporters, the scribes accompany ED providers on all of their patient encounters. Outfitted with laptops, they record patients' histories and take dictation on exam findings. They record the results of diagnostic tests and patient reexaminations while documenting the whole patient encounter. Scribes also assist physicians with any administrative needs they have.

"They are an integral part of our team now," said Dr. Allen, Scribe Program Director and Assistant Medical Director of the UF Department of Emergency Medicine.

Dr. Allen said that in addition to making the patient encounter more efficient, scribes allow physicians to focus more on their patients. Because the scribes are covering documentation, physicians can make better eye contact and engage patients more fully without glancing at notepads.

He credits ED Department Chairman Adrian Tyndall, M.D., M.P.H., and Vice Chair of Clinical Operations Thomas Payton, M.D. M.B.A., as being major drivers of the program.

“It certainly took persistence and evidence that this would bring value to our department while impacting patient care,” Dr. Allen said.

To get the program off the ground, UF entered into an agreement with the University of Virginia to use its practices for hiring and training, as well as its overall infrastructure. UVA helped with the first set of hires, and with classroom and on-the-job training “in an intense two- to three-week crash course” in starting a scribe program. Dr. Allen took on the majority of oversight responsibilities in May 2013.

The program has yielded measurable improvements. After the program’s implementation, there were “statistically significant improvements in basic ED throughput measures, including door to disposition time for all patients, door to provider time for discharged patients, door to exit time for discharged patients and door to room time for admitted patients,” according to the research article “An Assessment of Emergency Department Throughput and Provider Satisfaction After the Implementation of a Scribe Program.” When ED providers were surveyed about the impact of the scribe program, the vast majority indicated that the scribes increased their workplace satisfaction and levels of focus at work while decreasing their stress levels.

Competition for scribe positions is fierce. Last spring there were more than 100 applicants, and 80 people were interviewed for 14 slots. There are currently 36 employed scribes, 11 of whom have been accepted to graduate school.

“Basically, we pick the cream of the crop,” Dr. Allen said.

Scribes must complete 30 to 40 hours of classroom training in which they must pass quizzes and a final before being released to on-the-job training in the ED. Dr. Allen said the clinical training averages around 150-200 hours of exposure prior to being released onto the schedule to work independently. Scribes are asked to commit to at least 18 months unless they are in a “gap year” while applying to professional school. Gap year hires are asked to commit to 12 months.

“The training is something that is essential. We go above and beyond to train these students and gap year (hires) to be ready when they go out into the clinical environment in the ER department,” Dr. Allen said. “They’re ready to hit the ground running. We’ve had people who have been in other scribe jobs ... and they’ve all mentioned that our training is much more robust. That’s why we’re having such a good impact.”

For the scribes themselves, the program provides them with unmatched, extensive clinical exposure. They get a firsthand look at the basics of good bedside manner, how to deliver bad news and much more. Lawrence Castillo, a head scribe who has been accepted into the UF College of Medicine, said the experience let him know that medicine was the right profession for him.

“In all my medical school interviews, everybody wanted to talk about (the program),” Castillo said. “I’d say that scribing is unrivaled in terms of clinical exposure. In the ED, we see everything from dental pain to traumas to missing limbs, and you see everything in between.” 

Scribe Program Director Brandon Allen, M.D., is shown with FMA President Alan Pillersdorf, M.D.

