Early-Career Orthopaedic Surgeons Earn Similar Per-Hour Rate as Travel Nurses for Primary Total Hip and Knee Arthroplasties

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INTRODUCTION: There is a paucity of data regarding compensation for early-career adult reconstruction surgeons, who can be disproportionately impacted by reimbursement cuts. This study aims to quantify the time throughout the full episode-of-care for a Medicare primary total hip and knee arthroplasty (TJA) and convert to per-hour pay for early-career arthroplasty surgeons at various geographic locations and practice settings. Using Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) data, this study also compares the compensation of early-career vs. established TJA surgeons.

METHODS: Between January 2022 and January 2023, three early-career surgeons in three different locations collected prospective data on time spent in patient care during the global period following primary TJAs. A weighted average time spent per primary TJA during global period was calculated with the 2023 work Relative Value Unit (wRVU) and Conversion Factor (CF) to establish a per-hour rate. This rate was then compared to compensation rates of other career healthcare-related fields and also to established TJA surgeons using RUC values.

RESULTS: A total of 334 primary TJAs (148 hips and 186 knees) were performed among three surgeons and per-hour compensation rates of \$88.96 and \$88.49 were found, respectively. These rates are less than hospital CEOs, healthcare system CEOs, health insurance CEOs, med tech CEOs, lawyers, dentists, and within a single dollar of travel nurses. Moreover, early-career TJA surgeons were found to take 10-11.4% longer than the RUC standard times for a TJA episode-of-care.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: This study quantifies the real-world per-hour compensation of early-career arthroplasty surgeons, who earn similar compensation rates to travel nurses and take longer than standard CMS RUC times for primary TJAs. The time required for early-career TJA surgeons to care for a Medicare THA or TKA patient averaged 447.97 minutes and 450.37 minutes, respectively. These times equated to per-hour rates of \$88.96 and \$88.49 2023 USD. These compensation rates are less than lawyers, dentists, and hospital CEOs to name a few, while being within margin of error for travel nurse pay (\$87.97). Early-career orthopaedic surgeons have learning curves and unique stressors that contribute additional time to their overall workload early in their careers. This study found that early-career TJA surgeons make, on average, 9.14% to 10.29% less per-hour for primary THA and TKA, respectively, than their established peers. Given increasing demand of primary TJAs, decreasing reimbursement rates, and concern of burn-out patients in orthopaedics. future access quality primary TJA care for is concerning.

