

# **Caring for Patients after Total Joint Arthroplasty: The Hidden Workload of Telephone Calls and Portal Messages**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

As a cost-containment strategy to reduce the utilization of total hip (THA) and knee (TKA) arthroplasty inpatient services, practices are managing patient services via telephone and web encounters at an increased rate. Postoperative care for patients requires significant effort and back-and-forth communication between patients, providers, and ancillary staff. The study aims to highlight the postoperative workload created by telephone calls and portal messages and to analyze differences in communication points between beneficiaries of Traditional Medicare, commercial insurance, and Medicare Advantage.

## **METHODS:**

The study is a retrospective review of 192,701 telephone calls and 12,936 portal messages between patients and staff within 90 days of undergoing a total joint arthroplasty (TJA). The cohort includes 18,430 patients undergoing primary THA and 25,322 undergoing primary TKA between 2016-2023. Each telephone and portal message is categorized by the individual making the encounter and the reason for the encounter. Communication points are further sub-analyzed based on insurance type.

## **RESULTS:**

Within the postoperative period, there was an average of 4.40 telephone calls per patient for TJA, 4.09 calls for THA, and 4.63 calls for TKA. Portal messages added another 2.82 encounters for TJA, 2.82 for THA, and 2.81 for TKA. Incoming calls from patients accounted for 48.8% of telephone encounters, while outgoing calls by staff in response to portal messages accounted for 25.5%. Most common reasons for encounters were questions about postoperative care, requests for prescriptions, pain, and paperwork. Only 2.12% of Traditional Medicare patients utilized portal messages compared to 11.7% of commercial patients.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:**

As virtual communication becomes more ubiquitous and expected by patients, future payment models need to acknowledge the time spent communicating via phone calls and portal messages. Understanding the reasons for additional calls and messages can facilitate better in-person coaching to decrease the burden on ancillary staff.