Missed labs are a “contextual red flag” that is rarely probed (i.e. asked about)…

Recently, coders have noticed that out of 21 patients whose charts indicated they had not completed ordered labs, only one patient was asked why they hadn’t completed the lab visit.  It turned out that the patient often ran out of minutes on his cell phone and wasn’t getting messages. The provider put the daughter’s phone in the record after they agreed that would work.

While providers have gotten quite good at picking up on many other red flags, such as a  rising HgB A1c, or poor medication adherence, asking about missed labs remains rare. As the one example above indicates, asking may uncover “contextual factors” which can be resolved.

If providers routinely ask their patients why they didn’t come in for ordered labs when it occurs, they might be able to address other contextual factors (e.g. see if transportation can be arranged, write down the labs ordered so the patient can remember, etc.)

Helping Veterans with cost of care:

A patient mentioned that he was no longer attending physical therapy as recommended, and that it had been helpful. He had been going to a physical therapy facility outside of the VA but said had to stop before finishing because he could not afford the copay. The provider did not respond. The provider could have explored other options for PT through the VA; it’s possible that the patient was eligible for less costly, or even no cost to patient, PT through the VA.