



Artificial Intelligence With a Heart: How Front Desk Automation Is Rehumanizing Urgent Care

■ Saji Rajasekharan

Urgent care is no longer the healthcare industry's understudy or stopgap solution—it's become a primary point of access for millions. According to Urgent Care Association, more than 200 million visits are made to urgent care centers annually in the United States, reflecting patients' growing demand for fast, reliable, and accessible care.¹ Patient expectations mirror those of retail: seamless digital check-ins, price transparency, and instant answers. Meeting these demands isn't a value-add—it's a strategic imperative.

At the heart of this transformation to retail-level operations is the front desk. Tasked with scheduling, registration, insurance verification, and payment collection—often simultaneously—these teams are stretched to the limit. According to an analysis of 7,000 medical practice phone calls, 42% of patient calls went unanswered during business hours.² The issue isn't dedication; it's a flawed system that asks too much while offering too little.

This is where artificial intelligence (AI) can make a meaningful impact. Beyond automating routine tasks, AI has the potential to support frontline staff in ways that reduce friction and restore human connection. When deployed with intention, AI doesn't replace people—it gives them back what they need most: time, focus, and the ability to truly be present with patients.

The Hidden Crisis at the Front Desk

Front desk staff are expected to keep everything running:



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managing workflows, solving problems, and setting the tone for the patient experience. They do this while navigating real-time pressure from patients, systems, and teams. The role is one of the hardest in the clinic and, often, one of the most overlooked.

When a significant proportion of calls go unanswered, it's not just a service issue. It's lost revenue and a missed opportunity to connect with a patient who may never call back. The front desk isn't just the first impression, it's the foundation of the urgent care experience. If we don't support that role, the whole system suffers.

Efficiency That Enables Empathy

There's a common belief that AI makes healthcare feel cold or impersonal. In reality, the right tools create space for connection by handling repetitive tasks that take time away from people.

When staff no longer have to manually verify insurance, answer routine calls, or track down forms, they can focus on the patient in front of them. Technology becomes an ally, not a barrier. It helps clinics deliver both efficiency and warmth—something urgent care uniquely demands.

Real-World AI That's Already Working

Technology should never be an extra layer between patients and care. If built right, it becomes the bridge. Every

task AI reliably removes from the front desk is another moment a staff member can spend connecting with a patient—and that’s where the real value is. Here’s how AI is delivering measurable results in clinics today:

- **Voice assistants** can now automate more than 50% of inbound phone calls, handling scheduling, billing, and insurance questions around the clock.³ That frees up staff to stay focused on in-person care.
- **AI-driven insurance matching** helps eliminate payer errors by using optical character recognition and past claims data to suggest the correct payer during registration. This reduces billing rework and denials.
- **Digital intake and visit-type workflows** allow clinics to customize intake forms based on the visit reason. A patient presenting for a flu vaccine, for example, only sees the questions they need to answer—nothing more.
- **Ambient AI scribes** listen to and transcribe provider-patient conversations into a standardized format supporting clear and concise reporting in the medical record—helping reduce after-hours documentation and allowing clinicians to stay present.
- **Predictive triage tools** surface high-risk patients earlier, improving prioritization and care delivery.

Guardrails That Keep People in Control

AI in healthcare must always be assistive, not autonomous. That’s why human-in-the-loop design—a model in which people remain actively involved in reviewing, validating, or adjusting AI outputs—is critical. Staff can override, confirm, or redirect what the system recommends, keeping clinical judgment and operational control exactly where it belongs: with people.

Privacy and ethics are equally essential. AI systems that process Protected Health Information must adhere to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act regulations to ensure patient data is secure and confidential. But ethics goes beyond compliance. When AI is involved in clinical decisions or patient communication, it must uphold transparency, fairness, and accountability. This means avoiding algorithmic bias, ensuring patients understand how decisions are made, and giving providers the information they need to trust—or challenge—AI-generated outputs.

The regulatory landscape is also evolving. The Food and Drug Administration has proposed a framework for AI and machine-learning-based software-as-a-medical-device tools, which emphasizes continuous learning, safety, and real-world performance monitoring.⁴ This under-

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scores a growing industrywide expectation: AI must not just perform, but perform transparently and responsibly.

Smarter systems are only as good as they are reliable. The goal isn’t just automation—it’s confidence, clarity, and care.

The Human-Led, AI-Supported Clinic

Imagine a clinic where patients aren’t asked to repeat their insurance details multiple times, where every call is answered promptly, and where staff are present and focused instead of stretched thin. That’s the kind of environment AI can help create.

Technology, when designed with intention, doesn’t replace human connection. It protects it. The best systems don’t just run smoother—they feel better for everyone involved.

Final Thought

If we want to rehumanize urgent care, we have to start by supporting the humans inside it. AI gives us the chance to do that. Not by replacing people but by giving them room to do what they do best. ■

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