Thank You: Viewing Patient Complaints as an Opportunity to Improve

Effective strategies for handling dissatisfied patients efficiently and fairly.

BY VICKI GUIN

Instead of experiencing a feeling of dread when handling a patient complaint, practice staff members should instead be saying, “Thank you for bringing this to my attention!”

Though it may be difficult for some to believe, the practice is not always right. When errors do occur, it is wise to be appreciative of those who take the time to point out practice shortcomings. Patient complaints often illuminate the need for increased staff training or policy or procedure changes that can help the practice grow and improve in ways that otherwise might not have been anticipated.

TIPS FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

After team members cultivate a more welcoming attitude toward complaints, the next step is to make sure dissatisfied patients know their complaints are being handled efficiently and fairly. This provides a significant motivator for patient retention and word-of-mouth referrals. To accomplish this, consider utilizing the tips outlined here.

Establish a process. Create a clear and deliberative procedure by which patient complaints are processed to assure negative feedback is handled efficiently and effectively. Start by designating a specific staff member, by department, to handle complaints. Although some situations will require physician-owner involvement, many circumstances can be resolved by a dedicated staff member or quality assurance manager. If that person is unavailable, the staff member handling the patient should collect the pertinent information. This will save time for the quality assurance manager and prevent patients from having to repeat themselves, which can lead to added frustration.

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Move discussion to a private area. Respect the privacy of a dissatisfied patient and immediately escort him/her to a secluded area to discuss his/her complaint. Removing the patient from public view or earshot also protects the practice’s reputation. Explain to the patient that moving to a private area allows the staff member an opportunity to provide his/her undivided attention during the discussion. A consultation room or business office works well. If the complaint is handled via telephone, it is just as important to take this call in private. It is best if other patients cannot overhear the conversation.

Express regret. Say “I’m sorry” upfront. This can be very impactful. This is not to suggest that a practice admits wrongdoing of any kind, but saying “I’m sorry that you feel this way,” or “I’m sorry that you are having an issue,” demonstrates empathy. This can set a tone of understanding, which often helps calm agitated patients and usually gets the interaction off to a relatively positive start.

Let the patient vent. Patients needing to express dissatisfaction likely have had some time to dwell on whatever
has upset them. Because of this, it is important to give them an opportunity to vent. Use of active listening techniques assures that they feel heard. These techniques include:

- Maintaining eye contact
- Leaning forward
- Nodding
- Not interrupting except to confirm what patient is saying.

Collect and confirm the facts. While listening, capture all related facts as accurately as possible. This is essential, as the information will likely need to be relayed to the practice’s quality assurance manager. Gain the patient’s permission to take notes, and document everything in a notebook. When notes are taken, patients instinctively slow down their speech so that everything can be recorded. This tends to lower their heart rate and reduce their decibel level. To confirm their understanding of the information collected during this discussion, staff members should be encouraged to use the technique of rephrasing or repeating what he/she hears the patient says. This gives the patient an opportunity to confirm or correct the information.

Offer to consider the patient’s suggestion. Once agreement is established regarding the facts, ask the patient how he/she would like to resolve the issue. This doesn’t imply the practice should do whatever the patient wants. Rather, it provides an opportunity for the patient to contribute to the solution. Practices may be surprised at how often patients do not have a solution in mind. Or, if they do have something in mind, it is often quite reasonable; this allows the issue to be quickly rectified. For unreasonable requests, it is important to have explicit policies in place. Be prepared to inform patients why the policies exist and why it would be unfair to deviate from those policies.

Utilize a timeline to achieve a quick resolution. A timeline established as part of the practice’s processes and procedures help practices take the necessary steps to resolve complaints quickly. It is suggested that resolution take no longer than 48 hours. Patient complaints should not be placed on the “back burner” where they are easily forgotten or “lost.”

Meet follow-up commitments. Be sure to meet any agreed-upon follow-up commitments in order to instill trust in patients. For example, if a patient is told that he/she will be contacted “tomorrow at 3:00pm,” it is critical that he/she is contacted at that time, even if the issue hasn’t been resolved. Awaiting a call from the practice that never happens can incite the patient further, making resolution even more difficult.

Set appropriate expectations. Because surprise outcomes and billing charges are two of the leading causes for patient complaints, practices must set appropriate expectations from the beginning. Practices must be realistic when discussing outcomes with patients and be frank in discussions about costs for procedures or products. It helps to remember that it is always better to under-promise and over-deliver.

Utilize patient satisfaction surveys. Solicit patient feedback with surveys. This gives patients a voice and allows practices to head off any future issues by adjusting policies and procedures when appropriate. Additionally, it gathers feedback from patients who would not normally provide it and can lessen the chance that patients will go online and write negative reviews.

Track complaints. Record and keep track of complaints to identify significant trends in the practice. These steps should be part of a practice’s overall complaint procedure. Capture the patient’s name, complaint date, department involved, complaint description, responsible staff member, and the solution.

Make improvements. If tracking efforts identify any trends, try to immediately implement staff training and/or policy and procedure changes to reduce or eliminate future complaints. Hesitating or procrastinating could have a negative effect on the practice that requires significant effort to reverse.

**Change Attitudes**

Practice staff members should begin viewing patient complaints as opportunities instead of burdens. Implementing these tips will help perpetuate new attitudes toward dissatisfied patients and will help staff become more effective in handling complaints. This will lead to greater patient satisfaction, retention, and word-of-mouth referrals.

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