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Handling Unhappy (or Irate) Patients

The following is a situation that recently happened in a physician's office: A patient came in to complain about the "no show" charge of \$50. The administrator along with the billing manager went out to meet with him. His first comment was that he only wanted to speak with the "top person" in the office. After consulting with the patient's physician, the administrator took the patient in a small conference room and kindly said how she understood that he had a question about his bill. At that moment, you can expect what happens next – he wanted to know who she was in a belligerent voice and started to talk very loudly while never mentioning the bill during the ensuing verbal barrage.....

Handling unhappy and sometimes irate patients unfortunately comes with the territory. Unfortunately most front desk personnel and even some management personnel have never been trained on how to handle these situations. Most experience has come from "trial by fire" as they say. So here are some simple, common sense guidelines you might want to use in these type of situations:

Handling Unhappy Patients

Stay calm – They might be angry, but they are angry at what's happened to them, not at you. Your frame of mind and demeanor can greatly influence the conversation – either positively or negatively.

Know the problem – Do not start off on a solution without having a complete understanding of the problem. Don't stop talking with the patient until you're very clear what happened and what steps they've taken to date. Review what you know and make sure you aren't missing anything. Get as specific as you can with dates and with whom they've spoken.

Ask them what they want – You might need to do this several times, "peeling the onion" to get at what they really desire.

Know what you can do – Know what the limits (yours and the organization's) are in offering a solution. Your company's processes and systems are a mystery to your patients. Help them through the system. Don't let them get dropped or forgotten.

Say you're sorry – Apologize (authentically) for anything you can own – that they are frustrated, that they got an unexpected bill, etc. However, there is no need to apologize unnecessarily, or to admit fault.

Follow up – Make sure you follow through on what you say you will do. Do not make promises that you cannot keep, or on behalf of other people.

De-escalating an Irate Patient

- The first order of business is to get a screaming patient away from other patients who are within ear shot.. An irate patient wants everyone to hear his or her complaint. If you do not fear physical harm, invite the patient away from public areas. Try to make it neutral. (Don't use your office if possible – the implied power could actually make the customer more irate.)
- Focus on diffusing the anger. Acknowledge that the patient is unhappy. Remain calm and use a low, controlled tone of voice. Do not shout back at the patient. Control your body language. Don't give advice or orders. Never touch an angry patient.
- After you have acknowledged the patient's anger, wait and listen.
- If at all possible, work to a resolution of the anger before the patient leaves. Sometimes no resolution will be acceptable to both parties, but at least the issues have been heard. Giving in to a patient's unreasonable demands is not a healthy way to resolve the issue.

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