To Gauge Practice Success, Put Yourself in Your Patients' Shoes

By J. Scott Litton, Jr, MD [3]

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For those of us in private practice, not only do we strive to provide nothing but the finest care to our patients, but we must also remember that we are providing a service to those patients. In essence, our patients are our customers. Some practices take this for granted and do not regularly evaluate their work flow and processes in order to improve patient satisfaction. In some areas where physicians are plentiful, we must remember that if our patients are not pleased with their customer service they can choose to take their business elsewhere.

There can be several ways to evaluate your practice. Many websites provide the capacity to provide online polls for patients. A suggestion box can be used. Official Press-Ganey surveys can be used. Several years ago, I found it useful to simply place a suggestion box at the check-out desk and found that many patients provided excellent suggestions. Not only was the suggestion box able to be reviewed daily, but it was also much less expensive than conducting formal surveys. One such suggestion that was immediately put into action was echoed by many patients. They did like the ease of access to the office with same-day appointments, however many patients asked for after hours services. When I was in solo practice, I chose to make Monday my marathon day. Since several patients would call for same-day service following the weekend, I found it useful to extend my office hours from 5 p.m. on Monday to 8 p.m. This was openly welcomed by several of my patients, however I did restrict the use of late evening appointments to those patients that either had full-time jobs or children that were in school. As I added two nurse practitioners to my practice over the next few years, I expanded the evening services to three nights per week, with each of the nurse practitioners staying late one night each. Our reward for staying late one night per week was closing the office at 1 p.m. on Friday afternoon.

Another suggestion that was easily put into action was a repeated request for e-mail access for general questions. I added an e-mail address for appointments, one for medication refill requests and one for general questions and added an instant response message to each address that notified patients that their request had been received and they would be contacted in a timely fashion. This was again well received and the patients loved the ease of accessing our office staff. Of course we would receive occasional requests for an antibiotic or refilling pain medications, but when patients were informed that such requests required a history and physical examination in the office (they knew that anyway!), those questions finally went away. When my EHR software provider added the online patient portal, I added this new bit of information to the instant responses and the rate of utilization for those e-mail addresses has gone down considerably and the patients are now using their own private portal accounts for secure online communication with my office staff.

As my patient population has aged over the past several years, I have added home visits to my services. This was originally requested by a 97-year-old patient's son, who stated that his father was just not able to leave his house for anything other than his routine office visits. Home visits are regularly performed and the only requirement for providing such services to the patients is an indication of an actual need. I was in the grocery store one day a few weeks ago and ran into one of my elderly patients and he asked me for a home visit for his next encounter. My reply to him was that I am happy to visit him at his home when he is no longer able to go to the grocery store. Another useful tip for evaluating your practice is to enter your office from the front door and do a casual inspection. Are the seats neatly arranged? Are the magazines recent and not badly damaged? How does the office smell? Are the floors clean and is the overall appearance neat? You can also try calling your office from an outside line and see how long it takes for one of the staff to answer. You might find that things might need to be tidied up a bit. Also randomly ask your patients at the conclusion of their visit if anything can be changed to improve their visit for the day? Ask them how long they had to wait. Certainly if you find yourself running late, a polite apology to each patient with
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a reminder that their time is just as valuable as yours can certainly ease the frustration for those extra minutes spent waiting on you.
We are constantly keeping ourselves up to date with routine CME and reading. It is important to remember that your patients can be your best advertisement. A high level of patient satisfaction with positive word of mouth recommendations can be more valuable than any newspaper ad, any radio spot or billboard could ever provide for you. If you do not agree, ask your next new patient at the conclusion of their visit how they found you or decided to come see you?

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