

Patient Satisfaction – December 2008

I am sure you all pride yourselves on delivering a high standard of patient service. But patient service is a hollow and meaningless cliché unless you know why you do it and how to measure it. Patient satisfaction is determined by each patient's individual needs, experiences and expectations relating to your actions as the treating doctor. It is therefore the patient who defines what they need and expect from you. You cannot hope to meet everyone's needs but establishing a relationship with them will gain you "brownie points" all the same. Remembering names, showing an interest in and recalling small details about their personal life and of course demonstrating you have a good handle on their medical history, will help you build a relationship, from where you can really begin to exceed their expectations and create a small army of delighted patients, keen to spread the word about their fantastic experience under your care. The message is simple – exceed expectation and your practice will retain more patients and acquire new ones far more quickly and at very low cost. So, how do you "do patient service" to the required standard?

1. **Ensure you are ready internally.**

Make sure you and your practice staff have the right attitude and everyone is firmly onboard. Does everyone understand what's in it for them? That treating each patient as a dignitary will impact favourably on the practice by retaining and growing the patient base, leading to a successful practice and a happy work environment. Allow them to personalise their own patient service, consistent with some pre-agreed ground rules. Make sure the quality ethic runs through the practice and where necessary do not shirk on investing in training for everyone.

2. **Engage the patient before implementing any patient service initiatives.**

Listen to what they are saying to you and your staff. Either conduct a small quality control survey of what they expect (covering waiting times, telephone response times, appointment times, staff courtesy, cleanliness, clarity of explanations etc...) or talk to them and ask them personally. Don't make the mistake of assuming all patients will respond to some pre-set criteria. Each practice will have different patient demographics – geriatric patients and paediatric patients will not behave in the same way and therefore expectations will be wholly different. Listening to your patients is the singular most important thing you can do so make sure you pay attention to your body language – establish eye contact, unfold arms, give them your undivided attention and show them you care. Patient feedback will form the backbone of all the meaningful patient initiatives you subsequently establish.

3. **Remember that not all patients will understand the connection between your actions and their benefit.**

Try and see things from their point of view to anticipate needs. Organise some mystery shopping. Ask a friend to call to make an appointment and to actually experience the patient's journey in your practice or at your clinic. You will gain invaluable feedback on how to see your business "through your patients' eyes".

4. **Go the extra mile.**

Everyone delivers patient service. You need to find ways of amazing your patients by giving them something they could never experience anywhere else. When a patient comes to see you, it should be an event worth recounting once they are home or out with other people. This will create more lasting patient relationships, building loyalty and giving your practice a tremendous marketing edge thereby increasing your new patient base.

5. **Set your goals in stone.**

Draw up a patient charter. You need a consistent message about your service delivery. You must ensure your patient promises are identified and then delivered in words, actions and deeds by you and your staff. Communicate these to the patient from the outset in order to set boundaries and clarify what it is you are doing and why.

6. **Hold everyone accountable to your patient service promises.**

Implement measures to record progress on each promise you make. Make this assessment the cornerstone of how you expect your practice to run and how you expect your staff to behave. In this way it is, quite appropriately, the patient who dictates the level of service essential for a successful practice.

In summary – Remember that patient satisfaction is what the patient says it is! Make sure your practice is ready; engage the patient; do some mystery shopping; go the extra mile; set your patient service goals in stone and communicate on them; then measure progress and correct where necessary.

In conclusion, patient satisfaction pays, economically and clinically. It is the heart beat of your practice. It solidifies loyalty, attracts new patients, improves productivity and drives more profit.

