

RELATIONSHIP GOALS: TIPS FOR PATIENT RETENTION



A solid doctor-patient relationship will keep patients coming back.

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

Patient acquisition does not create growth unless these patients keep coming back, and one of the best ways to assure patient retention is to cultivate strong relationships.

The doctor/patient relationship starts when the patient begins thinking of you as his or her doctor and not just a doctor. This means you have earned the person's trust and become his or her "go-to" care provider. Not only will these patients return, but they will also speak highly of your practice.

Some of the best ways to provide a consistently positive patient experience include:

- **Scheduling carefully.** Avoid overbooking physical visits. Make sure clinicians are on time for televisits. Excess wait times quickly spoil the patient experience.
- **Making it personal.** No one likes feeling like a number. During consultation and treatment, give the patient your full attention. When making recommendations, explain why a treatment is right for that person rather than speaking of benefits in general terms.
- **Taking safety precautions.** In the wake of COVID-19, many people are nervous about in-person treatments. Be sure your patients know that you are conducting temperature checks and screening everyone entering the facility, carefully following social distance guidelines at all appropriate times, requiring all patients, physicians, and staff members to wear face coverings, sanitizing and/or washing hands frequently and limiting visitors and crowding by requesting patients come for treatments without companions if and when possible.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Most patient complaints are not about the quality of care. In fact, those issues only account for about four percent of all complaints, according to a study by Vanguard Communications, a health care marketing firm. The remaining 96 percent relate to customer service issues, with the number one problem being communication.

Most patients will interact with staff members more frequently than with providers. These interactions can help

shape the doctor-patient relationship. Some of the best ways to improve communication include:

- **Office staff training.** Everyone who interacts with patients represents you and your practice. When people see competency and efficiency in the office, they expect the same in the treatment room. The reverse is also true. Inadequately trained employees who struggle with the computer system and can't answer questions easily may appear incompetent, which reflects badly on the entire practice.
- **Upgraded technology.** Is your phone system or software outdated? Can they handle your current patient volume? Poor sound quality, dropped calls, and difficult menus can create a negative patient experience no matter how skilled and friendly your receptionist is.
- **Multiple contact options.** Many people, especially millennials, prefer communication by text, rather than voice calls. Additionally, in an increasingly 24/7 world, people don't want to wait for business hours. Offer alternatives, such as website chatbots, SMS, email, contact forms, patient portals, and private messaging.

RECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

In an ideal world, simply running your practice well would allow you to avoid patient complaints, but there

DO THIS NOW

Building patient relationships is all about earning trust. Most people understand that problems happen, but they need to trust you and your team to make things right. They want to see that you are taking it seriously and making an effort to correct it.

will likely be complaints no matter what you do. The good news is that complaints are also valuable opportunities to learn, improve, and potentially convert unhappy patients to happier ones.

To do this:

- **Take every complaint seriously.** Negative online reviews are available for anyone and everyone to see. They naturally command attention. However, it is a mistake to ignore the less formal, unrecorded complaints, such as a patient grumbling about the long wait times. Such dissatisfaction is most easily remedied when it is in the early stage. Strive to change course when a patient is mildly displeased to avoid a serious complaint later.
- **Own up to mistakes.** Sometimes the complaint is valid. The patient had to wait two hours for the doctor, the receptionist never returned a phone call, or a computer glitch deleted the appointment. Honesty is the best policy. If you have an opportunity to speak with the patient, admit the validity of the complaint and apologize sincerely. Also explain that this is uncommon—and prove it by providing better experiences in the future.
- **Learn a lesson.** When handling a complaint, your goal should be to determine why the problem occurred and understand what you can do to prevent it in the future.

This is especially important if you notice any patterns. For example, if multiple people mention rude staff members, it might be time for some customer service training.

- **Showcase your dedication to patient satisfaction.** Building patient relationships is all about earning trust. Most people understand that problems happen, but they need to trust you and your team to make things right. They want to see that you are taking it seriously and making an effort to correct it.

CULTIVATE BRAGGERS

It takes a conscious effort to build solid doctor-patient relationships. However, you will be rewarded with higher patient retention, better reviews, and free word-of-mouth marketing when patients brag about your great service. ■

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- A leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy doctors, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more.
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