

Optimizing Your Front Office

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When you think of quality medical care, you naturally think of clinical excellence. You have spent your educational years and professional career pursuing that goal. The business side of running your practice can seem like a nuisance, something that takes your time and attention away from your patients. However, neglecting office procedures and staffing issues can ultimately take patients away from your practice.

A Check-up For Your Office

How well is your business staff performing, how efficient is your office, and how effective is your marketing? If you haven't noticed any problems, you might think they must be okay. Now, imagine speaking to a patient who is using the same rationale for avoiding regular check-ups.

You know there are specific indicators of health that should be monitored, and regular examinations can detect serious problems long before any noticeable symptoms develop. The same is true of your business.

The secret to optimizing your practice and stopping problems before they start is identifying and tracking quantifiable performance metrics.

- Utilize patient feedback forms, surveys, or other methods of measuring satisfaction. Avoid making the request too long or complicated, but offer the option to rate specific experiences such as wait times, staff friendliness, and provider competence.
- Keep track of how much time your employees spend on tasks such as filing new patient forms, sending out emails, and verifying insurance information. Once you identify the time-wasters, check for services and software to automate or streamline processes. If you choose wisely, the savings in labor hours will compensate for the cost. Also, look for inexpensive and low-tech solutions, such as "cheat sheets" for commonly used insurance codes.
- Watch your financial flow closely. For example, excessive rejected insurance claims may be a sign that someone isn't coding them properly. If you frequently receive payments from patients past the due date, your staff may be lax in billing.
- Monitor your patient wait times. The national average in a physician's office is just under 20 minutes, and in a dental office it is under 14 minutes. If your typical times are longer than average, you need to find out why. Patient satisfaction decreases as wait times increase.
- Measure the success of marketing campaigns. Facebook engagement rate, advertisement views, link clicks, newspaper circulation, and other metrics offered by advertisers only tell part of the story. Leads are great, but they are worthless if they don't convert to new patients. Call tracking phone numbers, dedicated landing pages, publication-specific promotion codes, split testing campaigns, and similar techniques can help you track appointments generated from your campaigns for an accurate measure of ROI (return on investment).

FOCUS ON

OFFICE PROCEDURES, FROM CHECK IN TO CHECK OUT



Many patients begin forming an opinion of your practice before they ever see a dentist or hygienist. Vitals' 7th annual report found that people who had negative pre-appointment experiences, such as poor customer service when scheduling and long wait times, were more likely to rate the provider poorly.

▶ DOCTORS WITH FIVE STAR RATINGS HAVE OFFICE WAIT TIMES AVERAGING 67% OF THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

▶ THOSE WITH ONE STAR RATINGS HAVE OFFICE WAIT TIMES AVERAGING 171%

▶ THE AVERAGE WAIT TIME IN A DENTAL OFFICE IS JUST 13 MINUTES AND 51 SECONDS

FIVE THINGS (BESIDES CREDENTIALS) TO LOOK FOR WHEN HIRING OFFICE STAFF

TEAM
PLAYER



WILLING TO
LEARN



FRIENDLY AND
RESPECTFUL



ENTHUSIASTIC
ABOUT THE JOB



GOOD CUSTOMER
SERVICE SKILLS



MEDICAL INSURANCE AND DENTAL TREATMENT



If your practice does not bill Medicare, Medicaid, or many medical insurance providers, you might not need to use ICD-10. However, you might be missing out on a large number of potential patients who are covered under medical plans, but cannot afford to pay for treatment out-of-pocket.



According to an ADA Health Policy Institute poll, nearly half of all adults who do not see a dentist annually cite the reason as cost, or inability to find a provider who accepts their insurance.



Medicare, Medicaid, or medical insurance often covers medically necessary dental procedures, such as apnea treatment, correction of dysfunction, and many types of oral surgery.



TAKING THE PAPER OUT OF PAPERWORK



Offer new patient forms online to make first appointments faster.



Digitizing your office can save space and reduce clutter, with fewer papers and file cabinets needed.



Forms that can be submitted electronically allow for verification in advance, avoiding the last minute, "Oh, I left that home!"



Paperless is environmentally friendly, which is especially important for holistic practices.

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Assessing the Metric You Can't Measure – Employee Attitude

Unfortunately, the most important part of your front office is not so easy to measure and track. That is your staff. Technical qualifications and proficiency do not define an employee's true value.

A good employee has a good attitude. It is evident in the way he or she treats patients, coworkers, clinicians, and others at your practice.

The people who answer your phones and greet patients as they walk through the door are the face of your practice. Their friendliness and efficient customer service can turn a potential patient into a confirmed appointment, and help turn new patients into returning patients.

If it seems like your patients are unhappy before you see them, or are looking for things to complain about, you could have a customer service issue at the front desk. An excellent indicator of your staff's teamwork skills is your own stress level. You should not feel like a parent with bickering children every time you hold an employee meeting.

Replacing or Retraining Problem Employees

Sometimes the solution to staffing problems can be as simple as presenting clear expectations and holding each employee accountable for his or her responsibilities. A written policy manual, code of conduct, and job descriptions detailing duties and expectations are valuable tools in human resource management.

Retraining programs, employee mentoring, and even counseling can be beneficial, especially when your office is plagued by poor teamwork or personal issues between staff members.

Unfortunately, there are some people who are not capable, reliable, or dedicated enough to do the job right. Some are simply not a good fit for your practice and your team. Firing an employee may be one of the most unpleasant, and financially expensive, aspects of business, but it is inevitable at times. When it happens, or when you need to add staff, take care with your hiring process.

According to a global CareerBuilder survey of six thousand HR (human resources) personnel and hiring managers, the average cost of a bad hire is about \$50,000. The United States Department of labor estimates the cost to be about 30 percent of that person's annual income.

Choosing the right person the first time can save you a significant amount of money, and an immeasurable amount of stress. How can you avoid bad hires?

- Always verify certifications, education, previous employment, and other credentials listed on the resume before you spend any time interviewing.
- Advertise your job opening widely, to get the largest possible pool of applicants.
- Make the interview a conversation, and pay attention to the applicant's tone of voice, mannerisms, and general attitude.
- Invite senior employees and other clinicians to participate in the final interview.

Conclusion

From checking in to checking out, every patient's first and last experience at your practice is with the front office. Optimizing your team and procedures can help get more people in the door, and keep them coming back.

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