

SPECIAL REPORT

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Efficient scheduling reduces delays and patient anger

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Several years ago, patients in Florida and California sued their physicians in small claims court for wage losses the patients claimed they suffered because they were kept waiting too long in their doctors' offices. Both patients won their cases and the doctors paid the judgments.

Not every patient who is upset by being kept waiting to see a doctor considers suing, but patient satisfaction surveys find that few things anger patients more than a long, unexplained wait to see their doctor. Third party reimbursement limits make some physicians try to see more patients in less time, further complicating scheduling strategies. Scheduling delays may be unavoidable and justified, but in too many medical practices, long delays caused by poor scheduling practices are the rule rather than the exception. Even if patients who were kept waiting do not litigate, insensitivity to their time constraints damages the doctor-patient relationship. Better planning can help physicians and their staff minimize appointment delays and diminish patient discontent.

Set appointments to fit needs

A common reason for schedule backup is that receptionists assign the same amount of time for all appointments and expect that the unequal time needs of patients will allow the doctor to stay on schedule. Unfortunately, one miscalculation can delay all subsequent appointments. A better approach is to assign appointment times on the basis of patient needs.

The doctor can estimate how much time is needed to see a postoperative patient, treat a cold or flu, conduct a pre-employment physical, and so on. When patients call for an appointment, an alert scheduler can set aside the right amount of time. Schedulers may know which long-time patients require more or less time than the average and adjust accordingly.

Another reason for scheduling backups is the practice of double-booking time slots, which virtually guarantees delays. Few patients are satisfied with a two or three minute visit. Patient satisfaction polls suggest that patients believe that physicians in managed care are rewarded for reducing the time they spend with patients. Each patient expects and deserves a sufficient amount of the doctor's time to present complaints, undergo appropriate examinations or tests, ask questions, and to hear the doctor's recommendations. A frequent complaint in malpractice litigation against physicians (particularly those who are sued for a missed or delayed diagnosis) is that office visits were hurried and perfunctory. Doctors and managers should train schedulers to realistically estimate an appropriate amount of appointment time.

Schedule "specialty" blocks

Some patients have routine, minimal medical needs and prefer a short visit at a convenient hour. Consider opening the office early one day a week and use the added time to schedule business people who have to be at

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work early. Or, keep the office open later one day a week to accommodate business people, as well as homemakers who cannot leave children at home alone. Some physicians schedule a block at the end of the day to see patients who are elderly, or who reside in long-term care facilities, or who have multiple medical problems to ensure there is time to give these patients the attention they need. Some family physicians schedule a block of time on Saturday mornings so that young patients who have minor medical needs don't have to miss school to see the doctor. Some physicians who see patients who don't speak English schedule these patients in a block, to allow for extra time to communicate with the patients or their interpreters.

Make one appointment for each person

Patients create schedule back-ups when they make an appointment for one person, but show up with several children or a spouse and expect the doctor to examine and treat them all. Schedulers should tell patients when they call that each person must have an appointment time. Some patients may not be aware that the doctor's charges are based on services rendered to each patient, even if several family members arrive at the same time and have the same medical problem. If more than one person shows for a single appointment and there is no urgency, offer to see the added patients at the end of the regular appointment schedule, so that regularly-scheduled patients are not inconvenienced. Use a patient information brochure or a written appointment policy handout to educate patients about the doctor's scheduling policies.

Apologize for delays

Patient surveys consistently report that waiting time is a major irritant in doctor-patient relationships. Communication experts say that a simple apology for delays satisfies most people. Telling patients when they arrive for their appointment that there may be a delay may disappoint them a little, but the forewarning lessens their impatience. Staff members should tell arriving patients approximately how long the delay will be and apologize for the inconvenience. Patients are even more impressed when the doctor apologizes for delays. Few patients remain angry when the doctor says, for example, "I'm awfully sorry we kept you waiting. I hope you'll forgive us for the delay."

Make use of the patients' waiting time

Use some of the patient's waiting time to take care of important business. Ask patients who have not been seen within the past 6-12 months to update their registration information, or to update the list of medications they take, the names of other doctors they see, and drug or food allergies discovered since the previous visit. Many physicians stay on schedule by having medical assistants take and document vital signs, and obtain basic triage information (nature of problems, duration of symptoms, etc.) before the doctor enters the treatment room.

When delays occur, consider offering patients: (1) the use of a telephone to make local calls; (2) a re-scheduled office visit; or (3) an opportunity to run errands without losing their place in the queue. Make the reception area – don't think of it as a WAITING room – a pleasant environment

where waiting patients will be comfortable. Living plants freshen the air and enliven the atmosphere. Coffee table books, current periodicals, educational brochures, coffee and tea, crossword puzzles, or a television with educational videos help patients pass the time.

Expect the expected

Some surgeons and other specialists may be detained outside the office more often than other doctors. While their patients know this is a possibility, patients who are waiting in the reception area may not know the doctor has not come in to the office – unless someone tells them. In practices in which the doctor is routinely delayed, ask scheduled patients to call the office for a status report an hour or two before their appointment time.

Expect the unexpected

Many offices depend on the fact that some patients need same-day appointments or may drop into the office without an appointment. While some physicians discourage non-emergency drop-in patients, others ask their staff to block an unscheduled period of time each day to accommodate drop-ins without disrupting the appointments of scheduled patients.

Mail or phone appointment reminders

At the end of each appointment, if the doctor orders a return visit, fill in an appointment reminder card that lists the day, date and time of the appointment, and a phone number patients can call 24-hours a day to cancel an appointment. Many office also have a "tickler" file in which notes about future appointments are kept. One week before the appointment date, an appointment reminder is mailed

to the patient. A pre-printed, standardized notice can include reminders about completing lab studies or bringing in their medications, insurance forms, co-payments, or other information the doctor requested.

A most effective way to reduce the number of no-shows is to call patients at least one day before their appointment as a reminder. If calling all patients is impractical, consider phoning first-visit patients, those whose appointments were scheduled months in advance, or patients who have missed previous appointments. Use the call to remind these patients to bring in insurance forms, medications, or other information the doctor requested, or to remind them about dietary or other preparations for the visit.

Respect patients' time during their appointment

Except for emergencies, physicians should not interrupt an examination, treatment or a discussion with a patient to accept phone calls. Taking calls while a patient is present to discuss personal finances, home, or social events is unprofessional and may offend patients who deserve and are paying for the doctor's attention. If a call is from another physician and cannot be delayed, the doctor's apology will help patients accept the interruption. These calls should be taken outside the presence of patients to avoid breaching another patient's privacy. Office staff should not interrupt an examination except on matters of urgency.

Identify and correct scheduling problems

If your office habitually runs behind schedule, conduct a time study to locate bottlenecks. Upon

patients' arrival, ask a staff member to record the time they were scheduled to be seen, why they are being seen, their arrival time, and how long they had to wait before seeing the doctor. The study may indicate types of medical problems for which insufficient time is routinely allotted, or other obstacles to efficient time management. If specific patients are chronic "no-shows" or are late for their appointment, and conversation with them has not improved their behavior, consider scheduling their future appointments at the end of the day to minimize the impact of their tardiness or failure to give adequate notice of their need to cancel or re-schedule an appointment.

A patient satisfaction survey can assist doctors and staff to identify current or potential problems related to scheduling, as well as to other office policies. (Contact MIEC's Loss Prevention Department for a sample survey form.)

Educate patients about your scheduling policies

Use a patient information brochure to inform patients about your office's scheduling and appointment cancellation policies. Prepare an appointment "tip sheet" that is given to all new patients. An example is on page 4.

Creative scheduling, educating staff and patients about scheduling policies, trouble-shooting when time management of patients' visits is a problem, and communicating clearly about scheduling needs can reduce patients' anger and anxiety, improve the doctor-patient relationship, and enhance the working environment in your office.

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Appointment Tips for Our Patients

We know your time is valuable. Unfortunately, scheduling delays do occur and sometimes cannot be anticipated. It may be necessary on occasion for you to wait beyond your appointment time. We apologize in advance for delays, and assure you that we and our staff will do our best to keep waiting time to a minimum. These suggestions will help us reduce appointment delays:

- Keep your scheduled appointment. If you cannot, please call the office as early as you can so that we can free your time for another patient. If you are going to be late, call us and we'll try to re-schedule you in the same day.
- My staff is trained to interview patients on the phone on my behalf so that we can set enough time for your needs. When you call for an appointment, you may tell the person scheduling your appointment the reasons for your visit; the information will be kept confidential.
- Each patient must have his or her own appointment. Please do not bring more than one person for examination or treatment unless you have asked us to schedule time for them. We will be happy to schedule additional appointments if we know in advance.
- Please call the office an hour or two before your appointment. Our staff can tell you if we are on schedule or are experiencing delays.
- In order to give all our patients the time and attention they deserve, we accept non-emergency telephone calls only between appointments and after xx p.m. We return patient phone calls between the hours of aa and bb.
- Please call our office for urgent same-day appointments. If you come to the office without an appointment, you may have to wait until patients who have scheduled appointments have been seen before we can take you to an exam room.
- If you experience problems or unusual delays, or have suggestions on how can improve service to our patients, please let us know. We welcome your comments.

Thank you for your cooperation and understanding.

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Figure 1: Appointment Reminder Tip Sheet