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Establishing and Evaluating Patient Satisfaction With Your Practice

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Are your patients satisfied with their overall experience at your practice? When it comes to medical care (especially cosmetic services) patients have many options today. What will you have to do to ensure that patients keep coming back to your practice instead of going to a competitor?

Excellent customer service helps to achieve customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty; thus, patients keep returning to your practice and referring their friends and family. Knowing how your patients perceive the care they receive from your practice (ie, patient satisfaction) and understanding how you can evaluate their satisfaction can help improve your practice and your bottom line.

Patient Perceptions

Individuals perceive situations according to what they know and believe to be true. Someone's perception is his/her reality of the situation.

It is difficult for patients to accurately assess their satisfaction with healthcare providers. Most of our patients are not medically trained and therefore cannot truly evaluate the competency of the physician. They do not have a comprehensive understanding of medical or technical components of the visit. As a result, most patients base

their satisfaction on the service component of the visit. In other words, "How was I treated and how do I feel?"

The Service Component

A patient's relationship with the physician is a big part of the service component. Patients evaluate the physician-patient relationship based on their comfort level with the physician. They consider if the physician took enough time with them, if all their questions were answered, and if the physician was caring and compassionate. This is a subjective evaluation based on the patient's perception of the relationship.

The patient's experience with the rest of the office staff and his/her overall impression of your office facility also are factored into the service component. Patients expect care, concern, and courtesy from your staff, and they will evaluate your practice accordingly.

There are 6 main factors that patients consider when evaluating the service component. First is appointment availability. How long did he/she have to wait before being seen by a physician? Does the practice have hours of operation that fit his/her schedule, such as early morning or early evening appointments? Second is check in and billing ease. Are your check-in forms simple, requesting only pertinent information? Is your billing staff knowledgeable and readily available to answer questions courteously? Third is communication and keeping patients informed. Does your receptionist tell patients at check-in if the physician is running late? Are messages left with nurses returned promptly? There is a strong relationship between communication and patient satisfaction. Fourth is professionalism of the office space and staff. What is the patient's first physical impression of your office? Is the waiting room clean and tidy? Is your receptionist attentive and friendly? Does the nursing staff communicate effectively and respectfully with the

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Patient Satisfaction Survey Guidelines

- Word questions cautiously. They should be concise and easy to comprehend. Avoid asking 2 or more questions at once and do not ask biased questions such as, "Our reception staff works to provide you with check-in ease. Do you not consider our procedures to be efficient?"
- Ask about relevant issues: access, interpersonal communication, and quality.
- Ask the key question: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your physician?"
- Use a consistent scale for answer choices. Answers should be standardized in the form of scales: "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," or "excellent" to "poor." Use the scale consistently. Do not use a 4-point scale on one question and a 7-point on another; you cannot compare the results.
- Include open-ended questions. Sometimes you want to know more than "excellent" or "poor." It is acceptable to ask, "What can we do to improve?" or "What do you like best about our practice?" Responses to these questions can provide meaning to the scaled responses.
- Collect demographic data on patients who complete the survey. Ask patients to indicate which physician they saw and the date of the appointment so you can share the survey results with the specific physician.
- Strive for anonymity. Give patients the option to provide their name and telephone number if they would like someone from your staff to respond to their concerns, but do not require patients to put their name on the survey.
- Mail surveys if possible. A survey sent by mail is preferred over surveys distributed in person; however, this can increase the expense. If you ask patients to complete surveys in your office, provide a lock box for their completed survey to ensure anonymity. Also, the staff cannot be selective with who gets surveys. Surveys must be distributed consistently.
- Get enough responses. You should get a minimum of 50 responses per physician before attempting to draw conclusions about the practice as a whole. If you work with less than 50 responses, your snapshot will not be as accurate. Consider repeating the survey at regular intervals (eg, quarterly).
- Analyze the data. This may be the most complex part of the survey process, but it is absolutely necessary. Use a weighted score based on your scale when calculating the data. For example, allot 5 points for "excellent" and 1 point for "poor." Total the weighted responses for each question and average them to get the final score.
- Act on the results. It is not necessary to act on every suggestion. Review all of the suggestions and determine which ones would add value to your practice or which areas need additional research for possible improvement.
- Respond to the patient. Above all, if a patient has indicated they would like a response from your staff, make sure that responding is a high priority.

patient? Are the examination rooms clean and organized? Fifth is the scheduling staff and telephone skills. Are scheduling calls handled promptly, knowledgeably, and courteously, or was the patient placed on hold and then transferred to multiple extensions? Sixth is willingness to fix a problem. Do you and your staff treat complaints with respect and an open mind? Satisfaction often can be

restored in discontented patients simply by listening to their concerns. Each of these factors contributes to the patient's satisfaction with the service at your practice.

Patient Satisfaction Surveys

A patient satisfaction survey can be a valuable tool for your practice; however, there is an art to obtaining

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accurate and useful data (Table) Poorly designed surveys or surveys polling a small percentage of patients will not provide an accurate snapshot of patient opinions. There are many private consultation organizations that conduct and evaluate patient satisfaction surveys, but this is an unrealistic expense for most practices. Your staff can prepare patient satisfaction surveys for your practice.

Before conducting your own patient satisfaction survey, make sure your practice is ready. This includes cultivating an environment for your staff that embraces quality improvement. Be sure to inform your staff about the process. Let them know how the survey will be done, tallied, and acted on, and also explain their role in the process.

Patient satisfaction surveys can take many forms, but the most common is the written survey. Written surveys can be original, or they can be created from ideas compiled from other surveys, outside vendors, or survey-creator software. However you chose to create your survey, remember to keep it simple.

Conclusion

When looking for tools to give your practice a competitive edge, consider using a patient satisfaction survey. The information gleaned from the results is vital when looking at ways to keep your patients happy, satisfied, and returning to your practice. ■