

When your patients are happy, you win

Dear Reader:

I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from the HealthLeaders Media book, ***Physician Entrepreneurs: The Quality Patient Experience***: Improve outcomes, boost quality scores, and increase revenue.

Built around the key areas covered in the **Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS)** survey that measures patient satisfaction, this book with CD toolkit offers quick-to-learn and easy-to-implement customer service techniques that physicians and practice staff can adopt today—without sacrificing productivity—such as:

- » Tips and strategies for making the most of the limited time available with each patient
- » Scripts and checklists to improve doctor-patient communication
- » Guidelines for interacting with patients via e-mail and telephone
- » Case studies of successful initiatives that boost quality and improve satisfaction
- » Follow-up techniques for staff to enhance patient adherence and medical outcomes
- » Easy ways to improve CAHPS and payers' physician ranking scores
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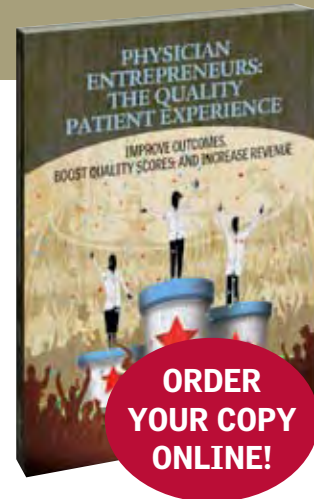
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Easing Wait Times

Technological advances have destroyed what small tolerance people ever had for waiting. E-mail, voicemail, fax, FedEx, Priority Mail, instant messaging, high-speed Internet, and the like have changed consumer expectations: We want everything, and we want it now.

Waiting for appointments, waiting to see the doctor, waiting for results, waiting for a callback, waiting for an answer—all kinds of waiting in a medical practice irritate patients and can stir resentment toward your practice team. And a patient's growing impatience makes achieving and sustaining satisfaction more difficult. As consumers become understandably and increasingly demanding, speed has become a powerful competitive factor in patient satisfaction.

Opening access

Patients hate waiting to get an appointment, and in many practices the wait for an appointment is, from their viewpoint, outlandish. In recent years many

practices have successfully reduced patient frustration through “open-access” scheduling, which makes it possible for a medical practice to provide appointments immediately or on the same day.

Same-day, advanced access, and open access are three terms for the scheduling model based on offering same-day appointments to all patients who call. The results: No long waits or delays in care, no triage, no deflecting patients to another-day appointment or another provider, and no stress from dealing with upset patients. The model has been proven time and time again to allow for faster attention to people’s health issues, increased efficiency, and dramatic improvements in the patient experience, as patients no longer endure frustration about waiting for an appointment.

In my experience with various practices, their transitions to open scheduling have produced impressive benefits, including:

- Greatly reduced wait time for routine appointments
- Improved patient satisfaction with the appointment times they were able to get
- Increased percentage of patients who matched with their own physician
- Increased visit volume as a result of fewer no-shows and better efficiency
- Providers able to reduce their office hours per week

Sound like a panacea? In a way, it is, but note that there is no easy recipe for converting to open-access scheduling. Practice leaders need to tailor this kind of system to their unique circumstances.

The key is to ground your plan in a set of tested principles:

1. Measure, analyze, and understand your supply and demand. These need to be balanced; you will not be able to sustain open-access scheduling if demand for appointments typically exceeds supply. If you accept more patients than you can handle in a timely fashion, you must turn down appointments, which plays havoc with the patient experience.
2. Develop a short-term strategy to reduce your backlog to zero so you can begin your new scheduling system on a predetermined date. There's no getting around the fact that you will have to work harder than usual in the short-run to make the transition to your new system on your conversion date. But of course, after that, both patients and physicians reap ongoing benefits.
3. Decrease the number of queues by shrinking the variety of appointment types and durations available. A single appointment length works best. It's easier for staff to manage, simpler for patients, and physicians find themselves getting into a rhythm that helps them stay on time. Also, staff who schedule appointments don't have to say no to patients who need a certain appointment type because the right-size slots are full. When longer appointments are critical, staff can combine two of the generic appointment slots.

4. Develop contingency plans for those occasions when you have more demand than expected or less capacity than anticipated.
5. Fine-tune the demand by matching patients to their own physician, maximizing what is accomplished in a single visit, and adjusting the interval between visit and return visits.
6. Allow some prescheduling of appointments for clinical follow-up. That way, you keep control of the follow-up appointment instead of risking that the patient will not follow through. You can also load these appointments into the lower-volume times of the day and week, so there will be less demand for such appointment times.
7. Address the bottlenecks and constraints that tie up physician time. For instance, shift as much work as possible from the physician to other members of the team.
8. Develop an education strategy for patients and staff. Clarify the approach, emphasizing its benefits for them. If some patients still insist (and few do) on prescheduling an appointment, honor the patient's preference, selecting time slots in the early morning or latter part of the week—whenever your volume tends to be lowest.

When you have open-access scheduling, you reduce the wait, which greatly enhances the patient's experience. Patient satisfaction improves. Your patients are more appreciative, cooperative, and loyal. Staffers experience less stress

and fewer patient complaints. Costs of care are lower. Revenues are enhanced. And you optimize clinical outcomes by providing “just-in-time” care to patients in need.

The psychology of waiting

When people are waiting, they often experience a lot of stress. You can reduce this stress by remembering and attending to the following principles:

- 1. Anxiety makes waiting seem longer.** We need to figure out words and ways to reduce anxiety. For example, say to patients:
 - “If you need to use the restroom, don’t hesitate. You won’t lose your turn.”
 - “If you need to contact someone about how long you’ll be, you’re welcome to use this phone or your cell phone.”
 - “Would you like to read a magazine?”
- 2. Waits of uncertain length are harder to tolerate.** Too often, staff members say nothing to patients about the upcoming wait because they are embarrassed or they don’t know how to estimate the time. Nevertheless, practices must write scripts that staff can use to advise patients of their waiting time. For instance, “The doctor will be able to see you within 20 minutes,” or, “It can take up to four hours before the doctor can see you because some procedures take unexpectedly long periods of time.”

3. Waiting feels longer when you don't know the reason for the wait.

People sit there and stew when staff members don't explain why patients are kept waiting. Make regular updates by staff a routine, not an afterthought. "Mrs. Jones, I realize you've been waiting for nearly two hours. I'm really sorry. I want to explain and give you an update. We've had ambulances bring in trauma victims through another entrance. These people need a lot of our staff's attention because they are in life-or-death situations. I'm sorry this has created a long wait for you. At this point, I'm estimating that it could be another 90 minutes."

4. People are much less tolerant when their wait feels unfair. Let patients know why they're waiting longer than others. For example: "Mr. Hardy, I want to explain why some people who arrived after you might be taken before you. People in this area are here for three different services. You will be taken when the team that provides the specific service you came for is ready. In the meantime, some other services might be ready for the people here for those services. So they are taken before you."

5. The more valuable the service, the longer a person is willing to wait.

This is no excuse for being callous about keeping people waiting. Just because they lack alternative providers or want *this* doctor or *this* service doesn't make it acceptable to perpetuate long waits. Fix the flow to reduce the delays out of respect for the patients, even if the delays aren't causing you to lose business.

- 6. Preprocess waits feel much longer than in-process waits.** It's important to get the care process moving, even if there will be delays along the way. Many emergency departments do bedside registration, have staging areas, or have triage nurses initiate tests immediately so that the person can be in process right away, even though there might then be long delays. In outpatient areas, people have an easier time waiting in the exam room than they do in the reception area because they feel that at least they are *in process*.
- 7. Waiting alone feels longer than waiting in a group.** It helps the time pass if family and friends can keep a patient company during any delays. If you have a policy that prevents family and friends from joining patients in the exam room, reconsider it. Figure out a way to make it possible for other people to be with the patient.
- 8. Time goes faster when you're occupied than when you're bored.** When people don't have anything to do, wait time feels longer. We need to use our considerable creativity and find ways to keep people occupied while they wait.
- 9. If people believe that you feel bad about inconveniencing them, they will be less angry with you.** Help the individuals on your team learn to sincerely apologize to patients and families when we keep them waiting, no matter whose fault it is.

Plan of action

Patients and families perceive timeliness as an indicator of your respect for them. Because of its extreme importance to patients and families and to the level of wear-and-tear on your staff, it pays to explore and institute improvements in timeliness. Here's a five-point plan for increasing respect for your patients' time.

- 1. Speed up the process.** Eliminate or reduce delays through process and technology improvements. Examples include implementing quality improvement processes, eliminating redundancies, limiting the number of people a patient interacts with during the course of his or her visit, reducing the distances patients must travel through your facility during their visit, and locating all supplies, equipment, and forms at the caregivers' fingertips. Eliminate obsolete steps: Hold a staff contest to find elements of a process that no longer serve a function. Acquire tools (e.g., computers and equipment) that work faster. Conduct flow analyses and staff up at the logjam points.
- 2. Remove the term "waiting room" from all signs, literature, and patient-staff interactions.** If patients must wait, provide diversions to make them time feel like it's going faster. Invest in seek-and-find word games, Sudoku, brochures about the provider, a meet-the-staff bulletin board, Internet access, computer games, fish tanks, an electronic messaging panel with wellness tips, "meet our team" trivia questions, and the like. Inexpensive subscription services can make this very easy.

3. **Underpromise and overdeliver.** Discourage staff from predicting a wait length that is unrealistically short. Encourage staff to proactively shape patients' expectations. Patient satisfaction is tied closely to what the patient has been led to expect about the length of the wait and whether that prediction turns out to be fact or fiction. The moral: In our services, we should be adjusting patient expectations (downward, if necessary) so we can meet or exceed them.

4. **Institute scripts and script rehearsal so that staff members communicate with empathy when informing or updating patients about delays.** Help your team deliver in an authentic way *great* words of apology, explanation, empathy, and appreciation.

5. **Respecting our patients' time and managing our own so we can is not easy.** With open-access scheduling and a multifaceted approach to easing waits in the face of unpreventable delays in care and service, you can win patient appreciation and enhance their experience with your practice.



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