

Reduce your risk by managing patient expectations

by Carol Murray

Reactions to unmet expectations can range from mild disappointment to extreme anger. Knowing the expectations of your patients can help avoid these reactions, improve their health care experience, and reduce your exposure to liability.

Each patient enters the physician's office with specific expectations. Those expectations may be uppermost in their minds or merely representative of a comfortable familiarity with a routine they have come to know. Understanding and managing patient expectations not only improves patient satisfaction but it can be an important technique in reducing risk of liability. An additional benefit will be smoother operations in your office.

One of the pitfalls of ignoring patient expectations may be a lawsuit. Studies have shown that as much as 70 percent of litigation relates to real or perceived problems involving physician communication, which influences patient expectations. Not meeting expectations may bog down office staff with excessive complaints and result in suboptimal patient compliance; it also could affect a physician's reputation in the community. Research has consistently shown a dissatisfied patient will tell other people, and as the word spreads, this dissatisfaction could be indirectly communicated to many more individuals.* Another troubling scenario is that patients with unmet expectations may never complain to the physician directly—they just won't return for ongoing care.

To understand patients' expectations, a physician must be aware of how they may have been formed. Personal experiences, or those of friends or relatives with a similar problem, can be important factors. Today patients are increasingly exposed to information from the media or the Internet. Drug companies promote their products in magazines and television advertisements, occasionally using celebrity testimonials. The number of Web sites with health information continues to expand.

The patient who brings information from these sources to his or her doctor visit believes it is valuable and expects the physician's interest. This occurrence provides an ideal opportunity to discuss their questions and to advise them that not all information available on the Internet is accurate. However, physicians must be sure to express appreciation for what patients have shared. Enhance this approach to pointing patients in the right direction on the Internet. Include in office brochures or post on the bulletin board a valuable health information Web site. These actions further encourages active patient participation in their care.

What are some of the general expectations patients may have? Literature suggests that most patients expect to be listened to by the physician, to receive clear explanations about their condition, and to be cared about by the physician and staff.

Although patients certainly come to the office

*Managing patient expectations. *The Healthcare Collaborator*. 2003;3(1).

primarily for diagnosis and treatment of their symptoms, research shows that they want physicians and their staff to like them. Patients, on a conscious or subconscious level, believe that if their physicians like them, they will ultimately receive better care.

They also expect a physician and his or her staff to look professional. For many patients, staff members are the key reason they return to the physician's practice. If they look less than professional, that may suggest to the patient that they are less qualified.

Uncovering patient expectations

Techniques for uncovering expectations can be varied. One way to manage the patients who may think they can address all complaints during a single visit is to ask upfront the nature of their visit. If they are asked at the beginning of the visit if there are any other complaints besides what was stated when the appointment was made, the physician may be able to better control expectations for the visit. It will also help to more easily direct them to make an additional appointment, if necessary, to handle the other symptoms or complaints. It lets the patient know at the onset what can realistically be addressed during the current appointment and gives direction about the need to schedule additional time for other complaints. Another approach is to have the office staff give the patients a short form when they arrive to state the purpose of the visit and to probe for other problems they may wish to present.

Showing care for patients is one of the more important expectations. How can it be communicated to them? Taking good notes during each visit will help with remembering names and issues they mentioned during that visit. For example, if the patient was leaving for a vacation after the previous visit, the physician might inquire if he or she had an enjoyable time. Another gesture might be to inquire about a member of the patient's family. Employ the listening skills of leaning forward, sitting down to communicate, keeping eye contact, and using facial expressions to indicate engagement.

Communicating in a way that helps patients to understand the medical information provided also indicates that the physician cares about them and their concerns.

Some approaches to providing effective explanations to patients include the following:

- Using similes or analogies
- Using statistics
- Providing patient handouts
- Using visual aids such as models
- Dictating reports in the patient's presence

Requesting feedback to test how much a patient understood what was communicated to him or her is important as well. However, it is important to clarify why this question is being asked. To ask, "Tell me how you will care for this wound," is less effective than, "I want to be certain my explanation was clear, so let's review your wound care plan before you leave."

Information expectations

Managing patient expectations also entails providing complete medication information and instructions. A cursory review of current literature from the pharmaceutical industry stresses the importance of complete and understandable information for patients about how to take medications—for example, don't chew, crush, or divide tablets; take with or without food; how to respond to missed doses, and so on. In addition, they emphasize how important it is that patients understand the possible side effects. The information identified by the drug companies is important for a physician to include in his or her patient instructions so the patient knows what to expect with the treatment regimen. Although a patient receiving medications from a pharmacy will be given an information sheet to meet his or her needs, those receiving sample drugs or injections in the physician office have the same requirement for complete information about the drug.

Clear communication of expectations of the patient, as well as a better understanding of the patient's expectations, pave the way for a more successful health care relationship. Establishing a health care relationship with new patients is most effective by starting with communicating clearly the "rules" and practices of the physician office. Patients are more comfortable if they know what to expect from physicians and staff. Most often, new patients want to know the following details:

- The hours the practice is open
- Billing practices

-
- How to reach the physicians after hours
 - How to most efficiently handle a prescription refill
 - What they should bring with them to the appointment

A useful tool to communicate the initial information is through a patient brochure or fact sheet. This tool encourages a consistent message from the office staff, who can emphasize key points by referring to the brochure. Patients may be unsure with whom to discuss various aspects of care or billing because they are uncertain of the role of various members of the office staff. An example of how to assist the patient is to have staff wear nametags with first name, credentials, and job title listed. It assists the patients in directing their clinical questions to appropriate clinical staff and the billing questions or administrative information to the person responsible for each function.

Unrealistic expectations

Dealing with unreasonable or unrealistic expectations can be very difficult. From a risk perspective, however, it is critical. The most challenging is the patient who expects a cure when his or her condition/diagnosis does not favor that result. The physician's role is to explain the reality of the patient's situation but still allow him or her a more optimistic view by making clear that everything available to assist with symptomatic relief to preserve the quality of life will be employed. Clear communication and gestures of caring—not just by the physician but also by staff—help these situations enormously. Physicians should guard against being evasive for the benefit of the patient or to reduce the risk of being sued. Often plaintiffs will state that a lawsuit was the only means to really find out what happened.

Sometimes the patient has unrealistic expectation of obtaining medication or a surgical procedure he or she has seen on TV or read about in the popular press. It is important to validate their right to request a certain treatment. However, it is prudent for the physician to explain that the best treatment for the patient's particular problem is being recommended, based on knowledge and experience. The physician should include his or her reasoning and the benefits seen in a particular approach to diagnosis. Ending with a comment such as, "How does that approach seem to you?" demonstrates a


partnership in care so patients feel empowered to contribute to the decision making. One of the most difficult aspects of illness for patients is the loss of control. By partnering with them, a measure of control has been restored to them.

If patients who cling to unrealistic expectations are encountered, recommending that they pursue a second opinion might be worth considering. If that consultant does not confirm the original recommendations, it might be best for the patient to seek out another practitioner. Continuing to treat a patient whose expectations are beyond the reality of the situation may place a physician at an increased risk for an eventual lawsuit.

Set expectations

It is helpful to examine practices that are followed by one's organization to develop strategies for setting expectations and to make sure that patient expectations are taken into consideration and there is response to their needs.

Conclusion

Patient expectations may not seem like a big deal but they are a real issue. Even physicians themselves have expectations of the care provided to patients. If a physician is able to see his or her practice through the eyes of patients, that will increase the level of everyone's satisfaction. 

For more information, refer to *Preventing Medical Malpractice Suits*, by James E. Schutte (Seattle, WA: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers; 1995).

Ms. Murray is a registered health information administrator, a certified professional in health care risk management, and a patient safety/risk management account executive with OHIC Insurance/The Doctors Company in Columbus, OH.

