

MMP Classic: How to Apologize to a Patient



I like to get complaints from patients.

No, I'm not a glutton for punishment. What I like about complaints is that I hear directly from the patient what is bothering them, and I have an opportunity to connect with them personally. The ideal situation is having the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the patient when they are in the office.

Here's how to apologize to a patient.

Step One: Introduce Yourself

I introduce myself and shake the patient's hand and the hand

of anyone else in the room.

Step Two: Sit Down

I sit down. There are two reasons for that. One is to send the message that they do not need to hurry – this conversation can take as long as they need it to. The second is to place myself physically below the patient. If they are in an exam room sitting on the exam table, I will sit in the chair. If they are sitting in the chair, I will sit on the step to the exam table. The message I am sending is “I do not consider myself to be above you.” It sends a strong message.

Step Three: Let Them Tell Their Story

I say *“I understand we have not done a very good job with _____ (returning your calls, giving you an appointment, getting your test results back to you, etc.) Can you tell me about it?”* I do not take notes as I want to maintain eye contact and focus on the patient, but I take good mental notes. The patient and/or anyone with them needs to be able to talk as long as they want. They might need to tell their story twice or many times to get to the point where they’ve gotten relief. The patient has to get the problem off their chest before the next part can happen.

Step Four: SINCERELY Apologize

I apologize, saying *“I’d like to apologize on behalf of the practice and the staff that this happened. I want you to know this is not the way we intend for _____ to work in the practice.”* If anything unusual has been happening, a policy has changed, or new staff have been hired, I let them know by saying *“So-and-so has just happened, but that’s not your problem. We know our service has slipped, but we’re hoping we are on the way to getting it fixed.”*

Don’t forget that patients can tell if you are not being sincere when you apologize.

Step Five: Answer Questions

Answer any questions the patient has. Why did the policy change? Why can't I get an appointment when I need one? How will you fix this for me?

Step Six: Close the Meeting

If the patient complaint requires an investigation and resolution, I give the patient a date when I will be back in touch with more information. If the patient complaint does not require any resolution on the patient side, I offer my name again and give them a business card or a way for them to contact me if they have further problems.

Step Seven: Resolve the Situation

I follow-up on the information the patient has given me to find out where the system broke down or where a new system might need to be developed, and if needed, contact the patient with further information and/or resolution.

Although most people prefer not to hear complaints, paying close attention to patient complaints helps a manager to keep a pulse on the practice, know what patients are struggling with, and of course, practice humility. All good stuff.

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