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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12 Ways to Supercharge Your Practice in 2012: #5 Create a

Patient Advisory Board

Call it an Advisory Board, a Focus Group, a Patient Board or Patient Council. Whatever you choose to call the group of patients you meet with regularly, you need to have a group of patients you meet with regularly.

Why start an Advisory Board?

1. You need to turn disgruntled patients into fans, and asking them to help you improve the practice is a great way to do it.
2. You need to have conversations with patients. Not patient satisfaction surveys, but real conversations about what patients like and don't like about your practice.
3. You need to find patients who are connected in the community who can gather other patients' opinions for you, and can send a positive message about your practice back into the community.

How do you start an Advisory Board?

- **Budget** for the new Advisory Board. Have name tags made for Board members. Have lunch (nothing fancy) at every meeting. When they leave the Advisory Board, present them with a plaque and a gift. Have a special thank you lunch (fancy) once a year for the Advisory Board.
- Have the staff keep a continuous **list of patients** they think would be good for the Advisory Board. Naysayers, Question Askers and Perpetual Devil's Advocates are all good choices. That one patient (or two) you couldn't do

anything right for. Don't forget parents or children of patients, caregivers and spouses.

- Set a standing **meeting date and time** for the Advisory Board. The third Thursday of every month at noon. The first Tuesday of every month. Send invitations and/or emails for each meeting.
- **Take minutes** and keep an issues log. Get answers for questions. Provide Board members with written records of the meetings.
- **Invite staff members** to attend the Board meetings on a rotating basis. Make sure staff have the opportunity the introduce themselves (everyone should introduce themselves at every meeting) and tell what they do in the practice.
- You may need to experiment with **physician attendance** and participation in the Board meetings and gauge if the physicians' presence is detrimental to open communication. You may be able to introduce a physician into the group after the Board has meet several times and everyone feels comfortable. Physicians can take turns attending Board meetings.
- You may get to a point when all the pithy issues have been addressed and the conversation doesn't fill the Board meeting agenda. This is the time to start introducing **short programs** on new practice services, new physicians, or special topics you want the Board's input on.

What is the right size for an Advisory Board?

Start with 12 people. Not everyone will come to every meeting, and some will probably drop off due to other commitments. If you target 12 people, have 10 stick with it and 8 people attend most meetings, it will be about right. If it isn't, you can expand or shrink the number by inviting more people, or not filling vacant spots. Don't forget to set a service term that you can exercise if you need to.

What can go wrong with an Advisory Board?

- One Board member monopolizes the conversation. Solution: start the meeting with a roundtable and make sure everyone else gets to speak before the monopolizer.
- The conversation never seems to get started. Solution: add one or two very conversational members to the Board. If you have a popular, bubbly staff member, have them attend the Board meetings and coach them to promote conversation.

What else can an Advisory Board do?

- Make videos about their experience as Advisory Board members for you to post on your practice website.
- Act as volunteer greeters in your reception area.
- Test-drive services or products.
- Recruit new Advisory Board members.
- Review patient education materials.
- Write posts for your practice blog.
- Advise you about practices and hospitals you referred them to.
- Your ideas here!