

A Manage My Practice Classic: Why I Can't Wait to Hear Patient Complaints

✘ I have not always been excited to hear patient complaints.

As a younger manager I absolutely dreaded when a patient wanted to speak to me. I felt that I had little to offer a patient who expressed anger or frustration with something that had happened and I was very impatient to get past the complaint and get back to my "job."

Now, I can't wait to hear patients' complaints. Complaints are the only opportunity managers have to understand the patient's experience and hear in their own words what went wrong for them. By listening carefully, you have the potential to accomplish several goals.

1. You can heal the patient's complaint, first by making sure the patient feels heard, and second by addressing the problem if something needs to be done.
2. You can gain insight into an experience in the practice and dissect it to see why the problem occurred and what can be done to fix it.
3. You can model to the staff how important patient complaints are and how seriously you take them.
4. You can retain the patient for the practice, and hopefully make them a fan who will recommend your group to friends and family.

In the past it might have taken a lot for a patient to complain to the manager as many patients will not risk disenfranchising a physician they really like. Today is the advent of the consumerist patient, and people are feeling empowered to complain about problems in healthcare (a good thing!) Healthcare managers need to step up to the plate to

meet them and make sincere attempts to cultivate a positive patient experience from beginning to end.

Here's how I suggest you listen to patients:

- Instruct staff to prioritize patients calling and asking for the manager. Unless you are in the middle of a meeting, **take all patient calls** as they come in. If you cannot take the call, ask the staff to make sure to document the best time to return the call and the number. Prioritize returning the call.
- You can delegate patient complaints to subordinate managers once you feel completely confident that they can handle the complaints appropriately, but you should continue to take calls periodically and check complaint documentation to make sure everything is going as you intend it to.
- **Listen to the patient until they are done talking. Apologize** and let them know that their experience is not what you want for patients. Go back over the complaint and ask questions to make sure you understand what happened.
- Tell the patient you will **investigate the complaint** and give them a definite date and time when **you will call them back to report** on what you've found.
- **Talk to all staff and physicians** involved in the incident. **Call the patient back** and share any information that is appropriate. Most patients will be satisfied to receive a call back and hear that their complaint has been discussed.
- **Offer your direct phone number** to patients and invite them to call you if they have any further problems. A nice touch is to invite patients to ask for you when they come in next for an appointment so you can meet them face-to-face.