

Managing Patient Complaints

Patient satisfaction is an integral part of providing care. Physicians should develop an appropriate system for evaluating and responding to patient complaints so that the office environment is conducive to effective delivery of healthcare and the practice is safeguarded from threats of unwarranted litigation.

Concerns about extended waiting periods or rude personnel can often be addressed immediately. Consider training front office employees and the staff who have contact with patients regularly to respond to these types of issues in a positive manner. If your staff is prepared to effectively communicate with a patient, they can quickly diffuse a situation. Communication strategies include:

- Apologize for the patient's experience
- Listen actively and ask open-ended questions when appropriate
- Establish eye contact and display open body language
- Offer solutions to the patient's issue

If the complaint can be addressed effectively by front office staff, no follow-up may be necessary. Properly trained personnel can positively influence office efficiency and patient satisfaction.

Of course, some situations are not conducive to immediate resolution. When a more serious issue arises, it is helpful to have one individual designated in advance to handle patient complaints. These issues may include an error in the provision of care or a HIPAA violation that requires a more formal investigatory response. The designated individual should utilize the aforementioned communication strategies to work toward a solution. Often, serious complaints may require follow-up with the patient. To the extent the situation triggers a reporting obligation to your insurer, legal counsel or regulatory officials, that obligation should be met promptly and completely.

For guidance about the appropriate response for unusual or difficult situations, consult your attorney. Responding properly may directly impact the potential success for any future litigation.

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