"Tune In" to Discover Why Patients “Tune Out”

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Doctor, I’d like you to spend a little time eavesdropping over the next few minutes or so. Listen carefully to how members of your staff handle day-to-day patient communication.

Chances are pretty good that you’ll hear exchanges similar to the following:

“Mrs. Jones, would you like to make an appointment now?” asks your staff member.

“No, just bill me,” replies Ms. Jones.

Or perhaps, this will be more common in your practice:

“Mr. Collins, would you like to make that crown appointment now?”

“No, I’ll give you a call when I’m ready,” says Mr. Collins.

Or maybe the typical exchange will be more like this:

“If you’re experiencing too much patient resistance to your collections, a script enables you to provide for your office that are prepared to handle the patient’s objections effectively. Without a doubt, handling patient objections is one of the most challenging areas of patient communication. In fact, the patient needs to be given the opportunity to talk, to express their concerns and suggestions. Demonstrate that you care about what the patient has to say. Don’t interrupt.

More than 200 should be given the opportunity and encouraged to make payment before the next appointment. Take this approach, “Mrs. Johnson, your first appointment is for a crown, and that fee is $670. If you would like to pay for the procedure today or on the day of your first appointment you will receive a 7% reduction on the fee, which would be $637.”

Wait for the patient’s response. If she says, “No, I can’t do that,” let the patient know that the practice also accepts major credit cards. If the patient says she cannot place it on her charge card, but would like to make payments of $50 per month, politely and compassionately explain the situation. As a result, the practice is unable to extend interest free loans to patients.

Then tell the patient about the arrangement with a patient financing firm, such as CareCredit. Patients are very open to pursuing major treatment when zero or low-interest financing is provided and clearly explained.

Identify the various scenarios the collections coordinator and other staff members are likely to encounter and plan for those using strategies similar to what is outlined above. Role-play the situations during staff meetings so that the staff fully understands the policies, and those responsible for collections, scheduling and other systems are prepared when patient’s objections occur.

Handling Objections

Scripting and role playing can be tremendously helpful in handling any confrontational situations or the rare confrontational interaction.

Most importantly, this helps staff to effectively handle patient objections, which occur daily and can wreak havoc on any number of practice systems.

In most cases, an objection does not mean “no.” Rather, it means, this is not a good time. On the phone, the dental office employee cannot see that Ms. Elliot, the business office manager, just had the responsibilities of three former employees handed to her when the company downsized. She needs to determine if it is possible to offer to contact him or her at a later date, politely conclude the conversation. Pleasantly accept the patient’s preference.

Follow-up the phone call or discussion with a letter confirming the conversation that took place and encourage the patient to contact the office at his/her earliest convenience. It should also emphasize that the office looks forward to providing excellent care for the patient in the near future. Enclose a card with the office phone number as a reminder for the patient’s convenience.

Continuously practice and refine your patient communications. Track which approaches are most effective and reinforce those. Before long, you’ll find staff-patient communication is anything but routine.