

Managed Care Rage

It's rubbed off on your patients now, too. Follow these tips to convert all of that negative energy into practice-building goodwill.

Managed care has had a profound effect on the way you practice. But it's also had another, equally important effect: it's changed attitudes.

Most ophthalmologists find it impossible to look at the profession the way they used to. And they find it even harder to appreciate patients the way they did in the old days.

But imagine how a new managed care patient feels coming to your office. To this stranger, you're just another name included under the heading "Ophthalmologists." (In fact, studies show that this stranger is likely to be completely neutral about you and your office before coming in.)

So what attitude often greets this new patient? A staff person coolly tells him to sign in, fill out some forms and take a seat. A clerk indifferently asks him for his insurance cards and whether he's read the sign saying that co-payment is expected the day service is rendered. It's easy for a patient to perceive this as impersonal disdain. Before you know it, the patient is no longer neutral; he's dismayed — or worse. And so is your staff.

I'd like to share some strategies to help you reverse this trend, eliminating managed care rage on both sides of your front desk.

Attitude dancing

The magic of a cheerful attitude has been forgotten in the hectic day-to-day business of seeing more patients in less time.

What's magic about attitude? Since we can't wish managed care away, attitude is the one thing totally in our control. Staff and doctor attitude — along with personnel, strategic planning and proper patient protocol and procedures — have always had a big impact on practice success. This was true before managed care and it's even more true today.

Basically, attitude can become a downward — or upward — spiral. If the attitude presented by staff members is less than rosy, patients will respond in kind. This will cause your staff to feel even more distant and resentful toward managed care patients, making the problem worse. The prognosis for a practice in this situation is not good.

The key? Turn the situation to your advantage. Patients are increasingly aware of the down side of managed care, and they're not happy about it. They know that offices have become more impersonal, and they feel more insecure because they don't know anything about you, or how you compare to your peers.

Their expectations have been lowered.

If you surprise them with an experience far more pleasant and helpful than they're expecting, you'll find your managed care patients becoming active supporters of your practice. And you'll create an upward attitude spiral, making your job a lot more pleasant and generating referrals (almost as though man-

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HOW ATTITUDE CAN ADD UP TO \$700,000 TO YOUR BOTTOM LINE

Here are some strategies that can help you boost your bottom line by as much as \$700,000 this year. These numbers are hypothetical, of course, but they'll help you appreciate how valuable good patient relations can be to your practice.

■ **Ask every patient for a referral.** Once patients have been pleasantly surprised by your practice's positive attitude, they'll be glad to refer friends to you. For example, have your contact lens technician say, "Mrs. Smith, here's my card. If I can be of any assistance, please call. Also, we'd be pleased to serve your friends and family. I'm writing your name on the back of the card so I'll know who to thank."

A happy patient, according to national averages, will refer seven patients in a year. If 11 of your patients in a given week decide to recommend you, you'll get 77 new referrals a week, or a potential 3,850 extra patients a year. With average revenue of \$115 per visit, this could add up to \$442,750 of new income.

■ **Offer to schedule other family members.** Have your scheduler remind each person making an appointment for a routine examination that she can schedule an appointment for a family member at the same time. This will be perceived as a helpful gesture by the patient and generate more appointments.

Let's say that your scheduler is successful in booking other family members a modest six times a week. If she keeps it up for 50 weeks, you'll see 300 more patients a year, adding \$34,500 to your income.

■ **Educate patients about new contact lens technology.**

Seldom do I visit an office without hearing a patient lament about not being able to wear contacts. If you hear 15 such complaints a week and your caring technician takes a minute to educate the patient about new technology, 25% of those complainers may end up as happy contact lens wearers. That \$250 average patient fee could mean \$46,875 at the end of the year.

■ **Set yearly appointments.** Tell patients that it's important that you see them in 12 months. Have them set up the appointment with your scheduler on the spot. If six additional patients every week return in a year, instead of 24 months, you've not only improved your patient education stats but earned an extra \$34,500.

■ **Educate in the dispensary.** Have your optical dispenser show caring for the patient by educating him about the benefits of ultraviolet protection, high index lenses and scratch-resistant coatings, and by demonstrating progressive addition lenses (PALs) to first-time presbyopes.

If 50 additional patients visiting your optical decide to purchase UV and scratch-resistant coatings (\$15 each) every month, that's \$75,000 in 1 year. If only nine additional patients a week choose PALs, that's \$78,750.

By taking these steps, your practice can solidify its image as a practice that cares about patients and works to meet their needs. And you will have grossed over \$700,000 more in revenue.

aged care didn't exist).

So first, make attitude an issue. Get your staff to understand the importance of breaking this kind of negative feedback loop. Second, focus on what the patient needs: *great customer service*. A focus on service will not only help you gain and retain patients, but it also can save money you'd otherwise spend on mass marketing.

Service strategies that work

Here are 10 important steps you can take to make your practice more service-oriented and more effective at meeting patient needs:

- ▶ **Look for ways that you (the doctor) can do more for patients.** Evaluate your major strengths and weaknesses in this area. Odds are good you'll find a few ways you can meet more of your patients' needs.
- ▶ **Build your presence in the community.** Consider writing a column for your local newspaper. Be sure to alert the paper about newsworthy items (new services, free screenings or eyecare-related community events). Also, consider starting a newsletter of your own.

- ▶ **Provide patients with take-home information.** This can do a lot to generate positive feelings toward your practice.
- ▶ **Make sure patients are treated well on the telephone.** Poor treatment on the phone is a major source of lost prospects and disgruntled patients. Also, make sure your answering service is courteous, well-informed and responsive.
- ▶ **Maximize patient convenience.** Look for ways to minimize waiting time and make the waiting area more pleasant.
- ▶ **Maximize a sense of privacy.** No one wants to feel exposed to scrutiny, or that their personal information is being made public.
- ▶ **Review protocols for handling patient complaints.** If you don't have an existing protocol, create one. Even something as simple as a suggestions/complaint box can be very effective. Add a tasteful sign that says, "We want to know if you're unhappy." Have your staff respond to complaints in writing. You can use a form

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letter, but make sure complaints that need personal attention get personal attention. This will help your practice strengthen its public image and organization at the same time.

- ▶ **Outline a procedure for explaining fees.** It may be helpful to create sample scripts so your staff feels comfortable discussing fees with patients.
- ▶ **Consider altering your office hours.** If you can make them more convenient for your patients, everyone will benefit.
- ▶ **Watch your own attitude.** Your staff's attitude won't change until they see that you're serious about treating managed care patients with respect.

Earning patient trust

As a consultant, I often ask staff members to identify their biggest complaint about managed care. The number one answer is that patients don't know what their insurance covers, but that they expect the staff to know.

The irony of the situation is . . . the patient is correct! It's your staff's business to understand managed care and to help the patient with it.

Does this mean you should require every staff person to understand every plan? No.

Again, it comes back to attitude. Most managed care patients aren't connected to your office (because most of them didn't get a recommendation from another patient), so there's no pre-existing trust. Trust must be earned.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Jones. We want you to know that no service will be performed in our office until we've told you about any fees that are involved and explained them in detail." These words, said in the right tone of voice, will let patients know they've found a doctor who not only offers superior service but also understands their concerns.

Educating the patient about benefits

A key part of building trust is keeping your patients well-informed about your services and — very important — the benefits they stand to gain from them.

You and your staff should work together to make the patient aware of the benefits they stand to gain. For example, if you use advanced autoperimetry or some other high-tech test on glaucoma suspects, make sure they know that this breakthrough vision test can confirm vision loss at an earlier stage, giving you a better chance to save their vision.

With the right attitude, and by emphasizing benefits, you and your staff can get managed care patients to invest in private-pay procedures. In marketing terms, your low-cost exam can become a *loss leader* — the less expensive service that attracts patients and lets you discuss the benefits of other more profitable products and services. Remember: Under managed care, making money on other products and services becomes a virtual necessity, because you're almost certain to lose money on the exam.

Your office should reinforce verbal education about benefits with written materials. This sounds simple enough, but marketing literature and brochures in the healthcare industry continue to focus on selling features instead of benefits. To prove this point, go into any medical office and read one of their brochures. All too often, you'll find no mention of what a patient stands to gain from a given service or treatment, and no testimonials from satisfied patients.

To make sure your staff is presenting benefits, ask them to list the features of each service and product you offer. Then,

HOW TO MONITOR ATTITUDE

Listen closely to the conversations in your office. Do staff members sound rushed and unhelpful? Do you hear a silent "stupid" at the end of sentences? If you can hear the unspoken, so can the patient. This just-under-the-surface resentful attitude may also be projected by clinic technicians and even — dare I say it — by the doctor.

Is it any surprise that this once neutral patient comes into your optical (the one place where you might really make up for the money you lose on a minimally-reimbursed managed care exam) feeling hostile and suspicious? Can you blame the patient for telling the optician, "I just want whatever my insurance covers, nothing more"?

It's more important than ever to keep an ear out for insidious forms of bad attitude in your office. Once you know what to listen for and start paying attention, you can detect it easily.

—Donna Suter

WHY THIS PATIENT WALKED AWAY

Here's an example of a typical experience under managed care — one you don't want your patients to have.

I was recently referred to a specialist for testing. My doctor asked me if I preferred a particular specialist in my plan. I said no, so she selected one for me.

It snowed the day of my appointment, so I called to make sure the doctor's office would be seeing patients. The answering service assured me that the office would be open.

When I got to the office the door was locked. In the lobby of the building, the receptionist let me call the doctor's main office. It turned out that only the *main* office was open.

When I complained, the office manager argued with me and said that if I'd called, I would have been told the branch office was closed. She then told me I'd have to wait 3 weeks to reschedule.

"Wait," I said, "I'm not holding you responsible for the snow, but since I called and then came down here and you were closed, can't you work me in sooner?" With a big sigh she said she could work me in one day sooner.

I then did what any patient not personally connected to my doctor would do. I said, "No thanks," and asked my primary physician to refer me to someone else.

—Donna Suter

have them list all of the benefits of each one for different categories of patients. (This is often more difficult than you'd expect, especially for staff members who are used to pointing out features instead of benefits.)

Also, make sure your staff can explain the benefits of coming to *you* for these products and services, instead of going to another doctor.

Making lemonade

You've probably heard the expression, "If life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Managed care has indeed soured the attitudes of many doctors, patients and practice employees. But by making sure your practice radiates a positive, caring attitude and is patient-friendly, service-oriented and focused on the benefits of your services and products, you'll give your patients a pleasant surprise — and they'll return the favor.

By using these strategies you can end the downward attitude spiral created by managed care, and turn the disadvantages of managed care into advantages.

Here's hoping 1998 will be your best year ever. **OM**

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