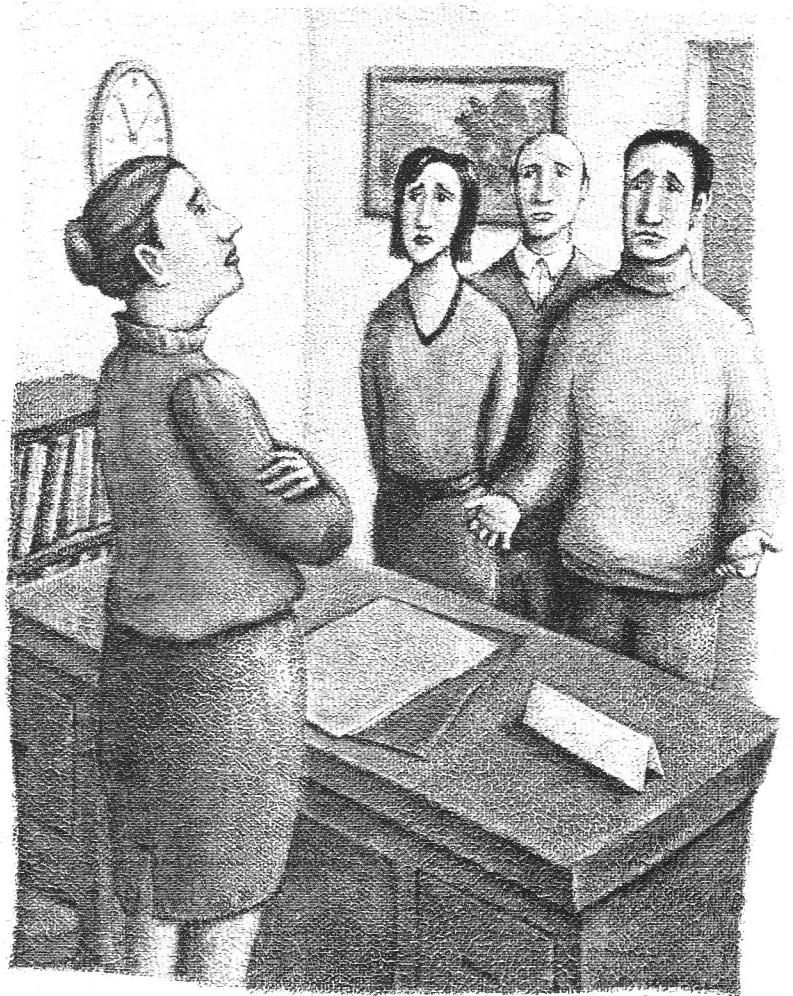


When Your Staff Has an Attitude Problem

By Donna Suter
Chattanooga, Tenn.



Every practice, regardless of size, has a reputation for the quality of care it delivers. How does “the best of the best” come to have an excellent patient care image? In addition to providing quality care, these practices understand the importance of treating patients with kindness and respect. Patient service surveys show that poor or indifferent treatment by staff is the number one reason patients give for leaving a practice.

Here, I’ll show you how to assess patient relations in your office and what to do if a problem exists.

Watch, look, listen

If you suspect that you have staff members who are treating patients poorly, collect data about staff-to-patient communications in a non-biased fashion. You can accomplish this by using one or a combination of the following techniques:

- ▶ have mystery shoppers call the practice
- ▶ hire a market research firm to interview patients
- ▶ mail patients survey cards asking patients about their in-office experiences
- ▶ hire a consultant to critique your staff
- ▶ videotape the front office for half a day.

You might be surprised at what you find. According to the U.S. Office

Rectifying bad behavior can improve patient relations and enhance long-term profitability.

of Consumer Affairs, the average business never hears from 96% of its unhappy customers. For every complaint a business receives, it will have 26 others that are unreported, six of which are "serious."

Acknowledge the problem

Suppose you have an employee named Mary in your practice who knows the front desk and keeps patient flow just the way you like it, but has trouble when it comes to patient interaction. You've come out of an exam room and heard her saying things to patients like, "You don't have your insurance card and you didn't bring your checkbook? Well, we can't let you carry a balance."

Or, "You're late. We'll do our best to work you in, but it'll be at least 3 hours before the doctor can see you."

Should you put up with her poor communication because she's so organized and the day sheets balance? Absolutely not. Even the briefest encounter with an employee like Mary can make your patients choose another eyecare provider.

What's the best way to handle an efficient employee with poor patient communication skills? Tactfully. When you're confronting an employee, it's important to give the person a

chance to clarify the issue without accepting excuses. Otherwise, you'll get hung up arguing or debating the validity of her excuses.

For instance, Mary may say that the patient should have remembered to bring her insurance card to the office. You may be tempted to ask who's responsible for reminding the patient to bring insurance information. But, the more productive way to handle this situation is to keep the discussion focused on the behavior, not the excuse.

Conclude your meeting with Mary by putting her behavior into perspective — you're reprimanding her for a specific action in a specific situation, not for being a "bad person" or a "bad employee." Let her know that you value her work in general, and in other specific situations.

Identify the cause

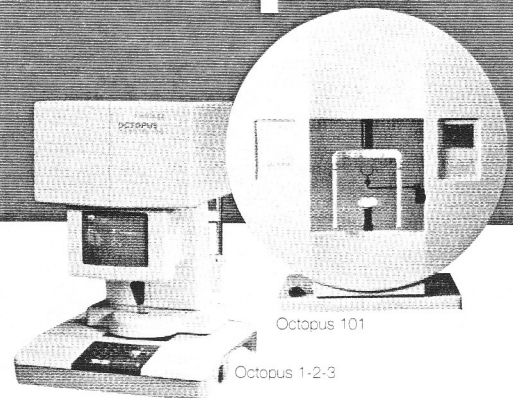
After you've spoken with Mary about the problem, you must consider whether the root of the problem is poor training or a poor attitude.

Having a positive attitude means seeing each day as an opportunity to get something done, to improve oneself, to feel pride and to appreciate other people. If these definitions don't

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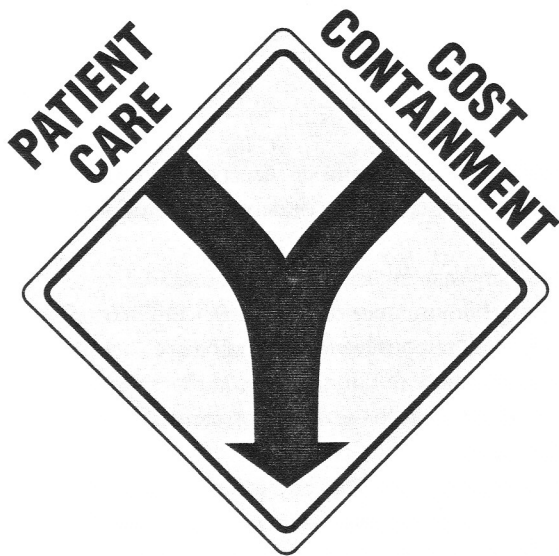
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fit Mary, then your management team may be partially to blame. Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, says that it takes employees about 2 weeks to begin treating customers like they're being treated by the boss. If you're angry about managed care and complain to staff, stop it. Both good and bad attitudes are contagious.

Correct the problem

Getting a practice of any size to become patient-driven requires two main ingredients. First, it takes an incentive program that rewards employees for focusing on patients. Second, it takes doctors and management setting the tone with their own patient-driven behavior.

The success of this strategy depends on your ability to communicate on these key issues:

■ **Desired behavior.** In Mary's case, you want her to treat patients with kindness and show patients that the practice not only cares for them but cares *about* them. Employees in direct contact with the patient must be courteous all the time.

Employees can't be held accountable to work to standards if you haven't set and communicated the standards. Does Mary understand that it's not her job to make patients feel bad when they hold up patient flow? Does she know that she frowns instead of smiles, and sits with her arms crossed? Build Mary's awareness of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Let's face it, being courteous isn't always easy. Here are some ways your staff can establish good patient rapport:

- ▶ smile sincerely
- ▶ keep a relaxed, open stance
- ▶ maintain eye contact
- ▶ know the patient's name and use it when speaking

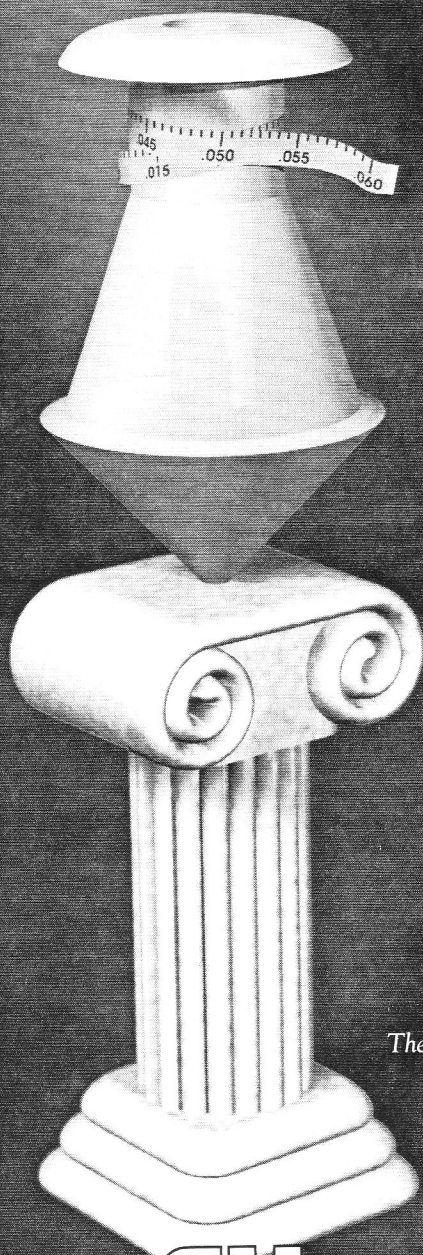
■ **Performance measurement.** People do what gets measured. Keeping track of Mary's performance will let Mary know where she stands. This can be motivational, too. Would you enjoy playing golf or tennis if you couldn't keep score?

You can assess Mary's patient communication skills by measuring the following:

- ▶ the number of complimentary letters the practice receives per month
- ▶ the number of patients who pay their balance the day of service (studies show that less-than-wowed patients carry balances longer)
- ▶ the number of patients who complain per week
- ▶ the number of patients allowing Mary to preappoint them for their next exam vs. the number of patients who came in for exams that month
- ▶ the percentage of patient satisfaction surveys showing a change in patient perception.

■ **Incentive.** Behavior that's rewarded is behavior that's

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repeated. You can use money to motivate your staff, but don't let it become routine. If the bonus becomes expected, staff will be angry and blame the practice when it's not forthcoming.

Try giving your staff positive feedback often. Focus the feedback on performance, not the person. People want to feel important and appreciated.

Anything that connotes status makes an excellent recognition reward. I know a practice that puts a photograph of the current "employee of the month" in the patient waiting room and has a plaque of all past recipients at the check-out station. An old saying from the military has it that a man won't sell you his life for a million dollars, but he'll gladly give it to you for a piece of ribbon.

The rewards of becoming the "best of the best"

In these days of "take a number" and "don't speak to strangers," patients are willing to pay more for excellent service. A Profit Impact of Marketing Strategy study surveyed more than 3,000 businesses and found that just by showing your patients how much you value them, you can:

- ▶ charge 9% more for your goods and services
- ▶ expect to grow your practice 6% faster than your competition
- ▶ earn 12% more on optical sales.

If you've got someone like Mary on your staff, view her behavior as your wake-up call.

Transform your practice into a patient magnet by making each moment that you and your staff spend with patients a rewarding one. Make your patients feel glad that they came to your office and you'll never have to implement another business strategy as long as you practice. **OM**

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