



The Value of Listening to Your Patients

Hearing is often better than speaking.

BY JON A. HULTMAN, DPM, MBA

An article focused on the widespread perception by patients that doctors are poor listeners appeared in the June 1, 2004 *New York Times* and was titled, “Tell the Doctor all Your Problems, but Keep it to Less Than a Minute.” According to the article, as a patient is explaining his/her health concerns to a physician, s/he is typically interrupted within 18 seconds. To the patient, this interruption conveys a lack of interest on the part of the doctor. The article went on to say that research also showed that as doctors explain patients’ conditions to them, only 15% actually understand what the doctor is telling them, 50% are uncertain as to what they are supposed to do when they leave the office, and by the time they return home, 33% have forgotten what they heard while being seen. It is no wonder that it is

difficult for doctors to achieve a high level of patient compliance.

According to Wendy Levinson, MD, the then Vice Chairperson (and

listening to patients is the number of times a day s/he hears the dreaded comment, “Oh, by the way doctor ...” just as s/he is exiting the treatment

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later Chair) of the University of Toronto’s Department of Medicine, this perceived “lack of interest,” coupled with poor patient compliance, results in poor treatment outcomes. According to Dr. Levinson, feeling they were “not listened to and did not have the doctor’s full attention” is a common theme in malpractice lawsuits.

One statistic that discloses to a doctor whether or not s/he is actually

room. This is often the point at which the patient brings up a whole new problem—one that has probably been bothering him/her for a long time but has not been acute enough for this patient to take a day off of work to see the doctor. Doctors who interrupt patients within these first 18 seconds are delaying these inquiries. They may believe that they are being efficient or sav-

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ing time; however, this is only an illusion. Studies have found that in most cases, when doctors allow patients to continue talking beyond these 18 seconds, the maximum amount of time that they need to express all of their concerns is 150 seconds. Interrupting actually increases the amount of time spent with patients, presents an opening

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for the “Oh, by the way” question as the doctor exits the treatment room, leads to the perception that the doctor is not listening, and increases the likelihood that treatment outcomes will be sub-optimal.

In addition to the fact that careful listening assists in making accurate diagnoses, there are other reasons for “listening” more carefully. A survey on “Why companies

lose customers” conducted by the American Society for Quality (ASQ) found that only 18% of a company’s customers are “lost” for reasons not directly under the company’s control—as when a customer moves. The majority of customers are lost for reasons that *are* under a company’s control, with 68% leaving because of a perceived attitude of indifference from the service provider and only 14% leaving due to dissatisfaction with the product or service. Obviously, this can translate to medical practices. When patients feel that doctors or staff are not listening to their concerns, they perceive this as an “attitude of indifference,” and, as with other types of businesses, this perception can account for a loss of 68% of their customers—patients. Eliminating this “indifference” could go a long way towards improving patient retention as well as the practice’s quality of care.

Based on the results of ASQ’s survey, one could conclude that an effective internal marketing program in a medical practice will be successful, especially if it includes a focus on doctor and staff “attitude,” which are as essential to retaining existing patients as to attracting new ones.

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Because many companies focus so much time, energy, and money on attracting new customers, they tend to forget about, or are indifferent to, existing ones. This encourages existing customers to leave. Likewise, doctors should not be so overly focused on attracting new patients that they appear to be taking established ones for granted.

A couple of statistics from the same ASQ survey concluded that a 2% increase in customer *retention* has the same positive effect on profit as cutting costs by 10%. They also found that a 5% reduction in customer attrition can increase profits by 25%. While this survey was not conducted on physician practices, it does indicate that it may be as, or more, important for medical practices to focus on patient retention than on acquiring new patients. While the acquisition of new patients should not be entirely overlooked, it requires external marketing, which can be very costly. Always keep in mind

that patient retention is equally valuable and can be accomplished through better “listening” and the utilization of internal marketing, which costs little to nothing. **PM**



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