

# Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

## Collections Corner: 5 Ways to Wrangle Overdue Patients Diplomatically

### Try courtesy before playing hardball to collect payment for services

A small-practice optometry biller can sometimes feel like a tightrope artist - walking the fine line between running a good business and upholding a good reputation within the community.

"Small-practice collections can be both a blessing and a curse," says **Susan Billock**, customer service manager for a medical practice in Grand Rapids, Mich. "The blessing is you see patients on a regular basis and have the opportunity to develop" a good relationship with them, she says. Yet tricky situations arise when you have to resort to an outside collector in a community where word travels fast, she adds.

Use these five time-tested tips to improve your collections success:

**1. Prevent overdue balances on the front end.** Have a clear-cut financial policy that tells patients what you expect from them with regard to payment, Billock says. For example: "Payment of copays is expected at time of service," and "Balances after insurance must be paid within 90 days," she says. You should also include what fees you will charge for returned checks, form completions, no-shows, etc.

**Copays are key:** Collect all copays up front, says **Kristy Anderson, CPOA**, billing manager for Bellevue Vision Clinic in Bellevue, Wash. You may be able to reduce the volume of your collections considerably once you no longer have to bill patients for their copays.

**Arrange payment plans early:** The biller responsible for collections and A/R should discuss any outstanding account balances with a patient at check out, Billock says. "You can get more cooperation from patients while they are in front of you than you can over the phone," she adds.

**2. Discuss your collections policy with your physicians.** The biller handling collections and A/R should sit down with the doctors to discuss how they want to handle patient accounts, Billock says. Ask how aggressive you should be in collecting balances - this conversation will ensure you aren't using collection methods the physicians disagree with, she says.

**3. Try pleasant phone-call reminders first.** Sometimes all a patient needs is a gentle reminder that his account is overdue. "Make sure you actually talk to the patient" and don't just leave a message asking him to call you back, Billock says.

**Be flexible:** You may have to adjust your work schedule to stay until 6 or 7 p.m. one or two days a week. This extra time will allow you to catch patients who aren't accessible at work during the day, Billock says.

**4. Stick to a standard collection process.** "Our patients go through three letters and a phone call in-house, then we send them" to an outside collector, says **Laura A. Bassett**, office manager for a two-physician medical practice in Columbia, Tenn. You may want to send one of the letters by certified mail to communicate that you're serious about collecting the money you're owed. If the patient still hasn't paid by the time the outside collector is about to initiate legal action, "We usually release the patient from the practice," she adds. There's simply no reason to keep treating a patient who has not paid for past services - no matter how guilty or obligated you feel.

**5. Use an outside collector.** You may feel uncomfortable about using an outside collector for patients your practice knows well, but the simple act of involving another party is often enough to get patients to pay.

