

## Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

### Practice Management: At First Sight: Your Reception Area Sets the Tone for Your Office

**Don't make a bad impression when patients walk through your front door.**

When a patient presents to your optometry practice for her first appointment, the first thing she sees when she walks in the door will set the tone for the rest of her time with your office—so make it count.

"First impressions are key to any medical facility," says **P.J. Cloud-Moulds**, owner of Turnaround Medical A/R Recovery in southern California. When the patient opens that door and feels unthreatened and welcome, it can go a long way toward comforting the patient.

Take these expert tips to heart on providing the most inviting reception area possible for your patient population.

#### Focus Energy on Your Reception Area

Some of the benefits of a proper reception area are fairly self-evident. It can reduce patient anxiety and give a good impression of the practice. Remember, the physician in the examining room is the last person a patient will see during their visit; the first sight for every patient, every time, is the reception area.

"I think it sets the tone for the practice," says **Maria V. Ciletti, RN**, who works as a medical administrator in Niles, Ohio. "If you walk into a messy reception area, your expectations of the care you will receive will go down. If you walk into a clean, quiet reception area, your expectations will rise."

Cloud-Moulds can relate, as she once went to a practice where patients were stacked in the reception area, waiting out a behind-schedule doctor.

"The reception area truly reflected the overall behavior of the entire office staff. [Patients] were all packed in ... people were even standing. My doctor was running two hours late," she explains. Once Cloud-Moulds saw the physician, "he was with me for about five minutes and shooed me away."

In this example, the reception area was chaotic, and the physician was entirely dismissive — not a good look for a medical practice.

#### Keep Area Clean, Current

The above example shows how damaging an uncomfortable reception area can be to patient perception of a practice. In general terms, you want to strive for the opposite of the reception area Cloud-Moulds describes.

**In short:** "A reception area that is calming, comfortable, and demonstrates that there were no corners cut is psychologically helpful to patients and supports the practice's ability to deliver care," says **Ester Horowitz, CMC, CITRMS**, certified management counselor and owner/practice marketing advisor with M2Power Inc. in Merrick, N.Y.

**Start here:** The most important issue is a clean reception area, says Ciletti. "No one wants to sit in a chair where there are dirty tissues, food wrappers, used coffee cups, etc.," she says.

To combat a lack of cleanliness at her practice, "our receptionist checks the waiting room in the morning, at lunch break and then at the end of the day," Ciletti says.

Keep things clean by putting hand cleaner on every table and counter to encourage handwashing. Once the place is cleaned up, other amenities you provide will depend upon budget issues, Stevens says.

Cloud-Moulds says you can forge a comfortable reception area with a few simple tweaks:

- Always have current magazines. "Toss anything out that is more than two months old. It shows a lack of detail, and reflects poorly on the business," she says.
- Avoid fake flowers. "They're not pretty and collect dust," reports Cloud-Moulds.
- Keep decor simple. "You don't need a bunch of fancy throw pillows, which usually end up on the floor anyway."
- Have comfortable seating, and plenty of it. "If you have people standing and waiting due to lack of seating, you have underestimated the space," Cloud-Moulds warns.

**Overcrowding solution:** If patients in your reception area are bunched like sardines in a can, remind your appointment scheduler to stagger appointment times by about 10 minutes. "This way, you can see the same number of people in any given day, but [the reception area] doesn't feel crowded," Cloud-Moulds says.