

Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

Reader Questions: Set Past-Due Policy in Stone

Question: Our in-house collections procedure is not as regimented as it could be. How many statements should we send to a patient, and how long should we try to collect on an account before sending it to an outside collector?

Georgia Subscriber

Answer: You should have a written policy on collections that you follow consistently for every past-due account, dictating exactly when you send statements, make phone calls and send accounts to a collector.

The longer you wait to follow up on past-due accounts, the less likely you are ever to see your money.

The number of statements you send will depend on your patient base and what works best for your practice. However, sending two statements before initiating further collections efforts is probably the most common practice.

Next step: If you haven't received payment after 60 days (two statements sent 30 days apart), call to inform the patient that you want to prevent his account from going to collections.

Slow payers may be reluctant to answer the phone or return calls. Sometimes a call from the optometrist directly can be productive, if the patient is somebody the optometrist knows.

Payment plans help: Preserving good patient relations is important, and many times this may mean working with the patient to arrive at a payment schedule both of you can agree on. Although it may take longer to get your money, a payment plan will help financially struggling patients avoid an outside collector.

Manners matter: Slightly aggressive or threatening tones may seem more effective when corresponding with patients who owe you money, but in fact the opposite is true. Collections experts agree that compassion and sensitivity to a patient's situation are far more likely to be successful - just don't let patients walk all over you.

- Advice for Reader Questions and You Be the Expert contributed by **David Gibson, OD, FAAO**, practicing optometrist in Lubbock, Texas; and **Charles Wimbish, OD**, president of Wimbish Consulting Group in Martinsville, Va.