

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

Practice Management: Don't Keep Patients Hanging on the Line With These 3 Phone System Pointers

Tip: Make sure a live person answers the phone during business hours.

Medical practices that do not consider their office telephone systems a vital communication tool could be hanging up on key opportunities to improve patient safety and relations.

Bad menus are a turnoff: The number one problem with the phone strikes before anyone answers: poorly designed phone menus that leave patients fed up with your practice.

Even more of a pain to patients are phone systems that route them to voice mail when they call due to illness or pain.

Patients don't necessarily hate phone menus □ they hate poorly designed ones or voice mail that turns out to be a dead end. The following tips will help you improve your system and keep patients happy.

1. Provide Emergency Hotline

Make sure your phone system always has a way for the person to reach a live person during office hours. Offices also need a voice message that tells the caller up front what to do in case of an emergency □ for example, whether to call 911 or dial '1' or an easy to remember extension.

Priority requirement: If you do offer a triage line option for emergencies, dedicate a special line or have a special ring that a nurse answers immediately 100 percent of the time. If that's not possible, then just provide the standard 'hang up and dial 911 if this is an emergency' message. Otherwise, patients with chest pain or other emergencies may end up wasting precious minutes waiting on the line.

2. Keep The Menu Instructions Simple And Short

Also make sure the phone menu includes the options first that patients are most likely to want □ and keep the whole message to about 25 seconds or less. Skip the "Your call is important to us ..." verbiage that leaves patients tapping their fingers or thumbing through the phone book looking for a new doctor.

If your office puts patients into voice mail, record a message instructing them not to leave an emergency message. Also, direct them to press '0' to talk to someone or to call 911 after hours. The message should also let patients know when to expect a call back and ask them to call back if they haven't heard from the office by that time.

3. Develop A Callback System

One of the most common reasons patients get upset with medical offices is when staff don't return calls on time. Thus, offices are wise to implement some policies/procedures to prevent this problem, which can also lead to major patient safety snafus.

Tip: Always read back the caller's complete name and spelling and phone numbers. For one, you want to get that

information right □ and reading back the information shows the person you're really paying attention and taking her message seriously.

Another good idea: Obtain multiple phone numbers for the doctor or nurse to call the person back.

That's important, because the patient may want to give you his work number when he calls to speak to the provider who will actually be calling him back at home later that evening.

Then get back to the person if the doctor isn't going to be able to call back at the agreed-upon time. For example, the receptionist might call the patient and say, "All of your test results aren't going to be in today, so we need to reschedule our phone talk."