

Psychiatry Coding & Reimbursement Alert

Patient Records: Get a Take on Patient Satisfaction Using Communication and Online Tools

Increase feedback collection methods to survey more patients.

You can put in place a number of methods in your practice to help develop better rapport with your patients and correspondingly improve on the level of patient satisfaction. In order to assess the level of patient satisfaction and to help improve on it, one method that you can adopt is to conduct surveys at regular intervals.

Though the pencil-and-paper (or digital) patient satisfaction survey is the tried-and-true method, it should only be one way in which you gauge patient satisfaction.

"My experience [with standard patient surveys] is that practices will often get the two ends of the continuum — patients who love the practice and those who don't," explains **Deborah Walker Keegan, PhD, FACMPE**, healthcare consultant, keynote speaker, author, and President of Medical Practice Dimensions, Inc. in the Asheville, N.C., area. Keegan is also a principal at Woodcock & Walker Consulting.

"With responses at these two extremes, it is often difficult to identify all areas of opportunity that can be corrected," she continues.

Solution: In addition to offering patient surveys, try these other methods of measuring what patients think the practice is doing well, and what it can improve on.

Option 1: Talk to Patients in the Office

Walker says that an effective way to get immediate feedback from patients is talking to them while they're in the office for their appointments. "This permits real-time data that helps a manager or supervisor make changes to communication or workflow" to improve patient satisfaction, she says.

Try this: The practice manager or front-office lead could head into the reception area two to four times a day, approach a patient, and ask about her visit. "When doing surveys, try to get them completed and returned when the patient is in the office," says **Barry Shipman, DMD**, clinical professor, University of Florida School of Dentistry, Hialeah Dental Center. "Make it a part of the chart. This way you are sure to get a response."

If you try this informal, face-to-face patient surveying, Walker recommends you keep it simple. "Follow a standard three-to five-question list," she says.

Questions you might ask the patient, Walker says, include:

- Were you able to receive an appointment within the time frame you sought?
- What was the courtesy and helpfulness of the front office staff?
- How long have you been waiting?
- What is the one thing we could do to make your experience with us better?

"Using mixed methods — surveys, conversations, etc. — appears to work best to obtain the reports of patient experience needed to inform the practice of opportunities for improvement," Walker explains.

Option 2: Talk to Front Desk/Front Office Staff

Another invaluable source of patient satisfaction information is your front office staff. They're the ones on the front lines, hearing patient complaints and compliments firsthand.

Getting front-office feedback can be done informally, in casual conversation. If you would like the process to be a little more structured, you might hold a monthly meeting in which you meet with front office staff and discuss how patients are responding to the practice.

You might also create a forum for complaints and compliments that staff has heard patients make.

Consider this: It might be a little old-fashioned, but a "Suggestion Box" might be the best way that you can get staff to report patient feedback they've overheard in the office. Put out a locked box with a slot for paper, and a small pad. Then, encourage staff to write down the good, the bad, and the ugly they've heard from patients.

The benefit to getting this type of staff input is that they can write something down in the moment, when it is fresh in their memory. Also, the "Suggestion Box" would protect staff anonymity.

Option 3: Maintain a Social Media Presence

This might not be for every medical practice, but you might consider maintaining a social media presence, such as a Facebook page, and encouraging patient feedback there. If you take this route, however, you need to be careful for a myriad of reasons.

"Social media can be a good channel for staying connected with patients," says **Laurie Morgan**, senior consultant with Capko& Morgan in San Francisco and author of *Management Rx*. But it's important that someone monitors the practice's social media presence if you're encouraging patients to provide feedback.

"You don't want a patient to make a comment or complaint that goes unanswered," explains Morgan.

The social media option also requires staff that is well-trained in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) as it applies to social media.

If the practice opts for a social media presence, you need to remind patients that social media is not the place to post any protected health information (PHI), recommends Morgan. If a patient has a specific health issue to discuss, encourage them to call the practice.

Option 4: Conduct a Patient Focus Group

Another arrow in Walker's quiver of patient satisfaction measures is the patient focus group.

With this approach, a group of patients meets with the medical director and practice manager. In the meeting, patients are encouraged to share their insights "regarding the patient experience, what is working, and what needs to be addressed," Walker explains.