

10 Practical Tips to Enhance a Patient's Experience with your Practice

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Editor's Note: The real-world, doctor-to-doctor ideas that Dr. Baum presents in this article are based on his 30 years of experience as a practicing urologist. These practical patient experience concepts are useful and appropriate to most other professional disciplines and healthcare provider practices.



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All of us want our patients to have a positive experience with our practices. It is a given that we are able to diagnose and treat medical conditions. But that alone does not give us a competitive edge. However, exceeding patients expectations about their care is a sure fire method of providing patients with a stellar healthcare experience. This article provides ten suggestions that will make you and your practice attractive to existing patients, as well as to help you attract new patients to your practice.

Phone techniques. One of the first interactions that most patients will have with you and your practice will be the telephone. There is a world of difference between *“Doctor’s office. Please hold.”* And, *“This is Doctor Baum’s office. This is Nicole speaking. How may I help you?”* Patients who hear the former message may be so turned off that they will hang up and look for their care elsewhere.

The best way to create a positive first impression is to emphasize to your staff how important telephone etiquette is to your practice. Then provide the staff who are answering the phone with a script that each of them are to follow that demonstrates that your practice’s compassion and eagerness to be of assistance to the patients. The script should be in front of every phone so that each caller receives the same courtesy and politeness that they deserve. Remember you don’t get a second chance to make a good first impression!

Send a Welcome to the Practice letter. You have an opportunity to impact a patient’s visit long before they are eyeball to eyeball with the physician. The best way to do this is to send the patient information about your practice and the healthcare issue that they are hoping to have resolved by consulting with you and your practice.

The *Welcome to the Practice Package* should include your practice brochure, a map providing directions to your practice including information about parking in the area, educational materials related to their chief complaint, expectations regarding payment, a patient history questionnaire, the demographic information that you will need at the time of the first visit, the importance of obtaining

authorization from their PCP (for referrals), and what they are to expect on the first visit.

See patients on time. There is no better way to endear yourself to your patients than by being regarded as an on-time physician. In the past patients were willing to wait for 30-60+ minutes to see their urologist. Today patients are tapping on the window after 15 minutes in the reception area if they haven't been escorted to the exam room. Make effective and efficient scheduling a priority for your practice and you will find that you can become a busy physician without staff burnout and without making patients angry and defensive even before you discuss their problem.

Make use of social progress notes. You want your patients to feel that you care more about them than their genitourinary organs. The best way to accomplish this is using social progress notes. This can be located on the left hand side of the chart or in a separate tab on your electronic medical record. Social progress notes include areas of interest, hobbies, children, grandchildren, and occupational history. The physician or the staff can record these in the chart.

When you see the patient again, you will impress him or her by mentioning their recent trip to the Caribbean, their accolades, and accomplishments of their children. So when John Doe is seen for a follow up visit, you can say, *“Mr. Doe, so nice to see you again. Tell me how was your trip to Disney with your grandchildren?”* Remember patients don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. The best way to show that you care is to use social progress notes.

Don't use closed questions, answered by yes or no. You won't get a handle on your patients by using questions that can be easily answered by yes and no. Instead, I recommend asking, who, what, where, why, and how questions to better explore the deeper feelings and issues of your patients. Many of us were trained to use yes and no questions but the open ended questions will yield better results.

Avoid speaking to patients who are undressed. My wife told me that she was so uncomfortable lying down on the exam table protecting her dignity with a paper gown while the doctor was explaining the findings and recommendations for gynecologic visit. As a result of her observation, I have made it a point of examining a patient then suggesting that they get dressed and I will return to the

room to discuss my findings and recommendations. I believe that this simple procedure will allow your patients to focus on your message rather than being distracted by protecting their dignity.

Provide a patient summary. Most patients only hear a portion of what we tell them at the time of their office visit. Therefore, I suggest you provide written instructions and recommendations. For example, if a patient has urinary incontinence and you recommend timed voiding, Kegel exercises and anticholinergic medication, then give them educational material about the use of their alarm clock, information on how to perform Kegel exercises, and drug information about the anticholinergic medications along with the samples. Now you have an educated patient and you are likely to have much better compliance with your recommendations.

Be sure to answer all questions. Avoid “doorknob questions”—when you are ready to leave the room and have your hand on the doorknob the patient brings up another problem or last minute question. I have circumvented this problem by providing each patient with a card that allows him or her to write out three questions they would like answered at the time of their visit. Now, when a patient is in the exam room or the reception area, they can fill out what they would like to have accomplished at their visit and thus I can avoid the doorknob scenario.

Offer a medication card. When I ask patients about their medications, their eyes glaze over and I we play “guess my meds.” I have found that patients appreciate a medication card that lists ALL of their medications including non-urologic prescriptions. Now when asked about their drugs in my office or in any medical situation, they have a card with a list that is current and up-to-date.

Call patients at home. Nothing can endear you to your patients more than giving them a call at home to check on their condition or progress. For example, if a patient had an office procedure such as a vasectomy, I give the patient a call at home to check on their condition and answer any questions that they may have. The patients appreciate this courtesy and you avoid patients calling you for minor problems that only need reassurance and can be easily taken care of when you give them a call and at a time convenient to you.

Be available through email. We are living in an electronic age and patients are expecting us to have a website and be accessible by email. A patient who needs a refill of their anticholinergic medication or their PDE 5 inhibitors and have been

seen on a regular basis, don't need to speak to the physician or their office staff. The best way to manage questions, allay apprehension and anxiety, and to demonstrate that you are readily available to your patients is to let the patients know your email address and encourage them to communicate with you using this technology.

These are just a few ideas that will make you the darling of your patients and will demonstrate that you provide outstanding and stellar services.

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