



Send the Right Message to Your Patients: 6 Tips for Proper Front Desk Phone Protocol

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We've all heard the adage "bad first impressions are hard to overcome." That is definitely true when it comes to your medical practice. How you answer the phone and how you handle patient inquiries says a lot about your practice. Does your front-desk phone etiquette send the message "*We'd be honored to have you as a patient*" or "*We couldn't be bothered*"? You might be surprised. Please find below 6 tips for evaluating and improving how your practice handles patient phone calls.

1. **Get Personal** – Make sure that patients (especially potential new ones who might be calling for the first time) speak to a "live" person. While an automatic attendant system may not bother some patients, others may be very frustrated by it. Why risk alienating 50 percent of potential patients when a live person answering the phone will satisfy all of them? Many practices choose automatic attendant systems due to their perceived efficiency. While we are certainly big fans of efficiency – efficiency must serve the greater goal of customer (patient) service and satisfaction. An efficient use of an automatic attendant system that also serves the best interests of your patients might be a prescription refill line or a lab-results dial-in system.
2. **The "Direct" Approach is always best** – Key personnel who make frequent outgoing phone calls to patients (nurses, insurance clerks, billing clerks, etc.) should have a direct phone number that they give out for return phone calls. Not only will this reduce the number of phone calls coming into the front desk (leaving those lines and your receptionist free to answer potential new patient calls), patients returning calls will stand a much better chance of getting through to whom they are trying to reach – a win-win for everyone!
3. **Come in through the "Back" Door** – Your main, published phone number should be reserved for patients and patients only! Consider a backline phone number for vendors, insurance companies, or personal calls for employees.
4. **It's WHAT you say and HOW you say it** – according to Protocol and Etiquette Coach Cynthia Grosso (www.charlestonschoolofprotocol.com), the training of the front desk staff has played an underestimated role in the success of a medical

practice. The correct medical office behavior includes the proper handling of the telephone and can set the tone for the patient's entire practice encounter. A pleasant front desk experience does not make the patient feel that he is an interruption, but instead a welcomed guest. Ms. Grosso strongly recommends that you think about the first 10 words that a potential patient hears when calling your practice. Do you want those words to be *"Doctor's Office, please hold"* or perhaps *"Good Morning. Dr. Brown's Office. This is Mary. How may I assist you?"* It makes a difference. At InHealth Systems and Services, our phones have always been answered *"It's a great day at InHealth. How may I direct your call?"* We've gotten more positive comments from customers about that one sentence over the years than almost anything else we've done.

5. **Patient Perception and the Malpractice Risk** – a recent survey of attorneys who defend physicians in malpractice litigation concluded that almost 70 percent of all malpractice lawsuits could be traced back to a lack of patient satisfaction – the patient's real or in most cases perceived lack of communication on the part of the physician or the staff. In today's medical environment, a large portion of a patient's interaction with the practice is by phone. Therefore, a large part of the patient's perception of the practice will be based on how that phone contact is handled. According to the Medical Economics article *"Where Malpractice Risk Lurks in Your Office," "Office staffers' phone manners can sometimes trigger malpractice suits. Of course, you'll never see a lawsuit where the plaintiff charges 'someone was rude to me'. But, if something goes wrong, it's often the non-medical problems that make a patient angry enough to sue. It's often the deciding factor when the outcome of care isn't ideal or when there's a complication."*
6. **Are you sending the right message?** – Oftentimes, when calling your practice, the patient must leave a message for the physician or nurse. When a patient is ill or concerned about a medical condition, they are usually not at their best. At those times, there is nothing worse than talking to multiple people in the practice and having to "repeat your story" over and over again. You should use or take messages at the front desk of your medical practice to minimize that scenario as much as possible. Have front desk personnel ask for and record the following information when the patient calls: patient name, patient's relationship to caller, the best number to return the call, the patient's pharmacy number (they were probably prepared with this information when they called the practice but may not have it handy when someone returns the call); and a brief description of the problem. Now when the nurse or physician returns the call, they can say something like *"This is Mary with Dr. Brown's office. I received a message that you called regarding your son who has been up all night long running a fever and throwing up. How can I help you?"* The mother will walk away from a phone conversation like that feeling as if your practice truly cares – you cared enough to make note of what she told you when she called in earlier; you cared enough to pass that message on to the nurse; and the nurse cared enough to reference that information prior to returning the call.

Do you have a front-desk phone tip or success story? We'd love to hear it. Please email us at editor@efficiencyinpractice.com. We may (with your permission) feature you in a future newsletter article.

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