



Late Patients

Question:

We have a number of patients that consistently show up late for their appointments. Although we have a policy, it is not well executed. There are differences of opinion on how to handle this matter. What should we do in this situation?

Answer:

This is a common dilemma. I think the main issue is to understand this from the patient's perspective. Frequently, our patients experience is that we are running late. The implied message is that time is not an important issue for us. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, if our patients experience is that our system and services are delayed and late, then logically, they don't see a problem with arriving late for an appointment. I often wonder why so many patients actually arrive on time.

A few thoughts:

- Don't try to pass judgment on why someone is late. It is a losing proposition.
- Don't build a policy that is punitive to late patients. Until our service is impeccable, we are in no position to punish patients for being late.
- Let late patients know you will do your best to work them into the schedule, if possible, and they may have to wait. Also, offer to re-schedule the patient if that works best for them. Options are always good.
- Do not bump patients who are on time to accommodate a late patient. This leads to some very difficult situations.
- Consider a conversation with individuals who are chronically late. If there is a way to flag them in the system when scheduling them, the script for them might look a little different.
- Let the provider and his/her assistant know that the patient arrived past the scheduled appointment time.
- Use a standard script that avoids the word "late." Have a plan in advance that does not require that you ask the provider's permission each time this occurs.