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Improving Satisfaction for Physicians and Patients: Managing Patients' Perceptions of Appointment Time

CPC Corner

Many physicians and patients would like to have more time together for their appointments. Unfortunately, given the volume of patients to be seen and the need to improve access, this scenario is not likely to happen. Here are some tips (based on actual physicians' experience and feedback from patients) that can improve the quality of interactions with patients and can assist in managing the patients' perceptions of their time with their physician.

DO ...	DO NOT ...
Review the chart before you enter the exam room so you are prepared for the visit.	... waste time during the visit to flip through the patient's chart.
Apologize for keeping the patient waiting (if appropriate) when you enter the room. This action demonstrates respect for their time.	... complain to patients about how busy you are or that other patients, departments, or staff caused you to run late.
Sit when you go into the exam room, at least for the first couple of minutes while you're building rapport and getting the patient's history.	... remain standing throughout the appointment. Standing gives the impression that you are not interested enough or willing to take the time to listen to the patient.
Build rapport by jotting down a personal note from each visit that you can ask about at the next visit (eg, "How was your vacation to Hawaii?" or "How was your daughter's wedding?").	... jump right into the medical reason for the visit without taking a minute to connect with the patient on a personal basis.
Plan the visit with patients at the beginning. Ask them what they want to discuss with you today—first identify all the issues, then prioritize together which ones can be addressed during this visit and which ones might need to be discussed at a future visit.	... focus on the first issue that the patient brings up—there could be more important issues from a clinical perspective that you might have little time to address. Do not say things like, "We only have five minutes left." This statement makes the patient feel rushed.
Summarize and empathize throughout the visit. This strategy demonstrates to patients that you have heard and understood them, and it may prevent them from rambling.	... cut them off abruptly or listen without responding; sometimes patients ramble to make a point. Most people just want to be heard and understood.
Summarize instructions at the end of the visit; ask patients to recap what they've heard to be sure that they understand what they need to do. This recap can cut down on unnecessary phone messages after the visit.	... assume that the patient understands or is committed to taking the next steps.
Confirm with the patient that their goals for this visit were met; if not, try to work out a compromise.	... assume the patient is satisfied. If their goals have been met, they will be satisfied with the time spent together—even if it is brief.
Ask if there are any additional questions and answer them before you leave the room. (Do not do this with your hand on the doorknob!) This closing can also reduce the number of follow-up phone messages.	... tell patients that you're running late, that their time is up, or anything else referring to time. Do not give the impression that you're too rushed or too busy for them. Patients already know you're busy!
Start on time whenever possible!	

"People may forget how fast you did a job, but they will remember how well you did it."
—Anonymous

Clinician-Patient Communication Intranet site: <http://kpnet.kp.org/cpc/>

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