
Tips for Successful Collection Calls: Business Critical in the Era of High Deductibles

By Elizabeth Woodcock, MBA, FACMPE, CPC

As patient financial responsibility grows, it's business critical to have an effective process to collect outstanding debt. It's an opportune time to review your entire collection workflow, to include making collection calls. These steps are aimed to boost your success rate, while preserving patient satisfaction.

Plan: Prepare for the call by knowing what is owed, as well as why and when the debt was incurred. You'll lose credibility if you're fumbling around during the call. Review the details of the account balance, and have a back-up strategy (e.g., payment plan) in the event the patient can't pay in full over the phone. If the patient owes a balance after insurance, communicate the original charge. Recognize that most patients garner significant discounts if the service was covered and your provider is participating with their insurance.

Greet: Introduce yourself as part of the practice: "Hi, this is Elizabeth from Dr. Smith's office." Avoid using "business office" or "billing service" when announcing yourself.

Confirm: Acknowledge that you are speaking to the correct person. Comply with your practice's protocols to properly identify the guarantor is the person with whom you are speaking. Don't share the nature of the call unless you are sure that you have a right person on the other end of the line.

Listen: After you state the reason for the call, stop talking. Wait for the patient's response. Provide information if asked; otherwise, it opens the door for patients to claim notices were never received.

Collect: Focus on gathering payment during the call, ideally the entire balance if not a substantial portion. If only a share is collected, be sure to incorporate the "odd" amount upfront so that the remainder can be divided into easy-to-remember payments. For example, a patient who owes \$371.47 would be requested to pay \$171.47 up front, with two remaining \$100 payments. Even better, offer bi-monthly installments: four \$50 payments every two weeks, in this example, which presents a more palatable plan to the patient while ensuring the end result is the same for your practice.

Offer: Extend a financial hardship discount, if the patient is eligible based on your

practice's protocol. If consistent with your practice's policy, waive collection fees or interest if the patient pays in full.

Be exact: Use specific dates; instead of telling patients to “pay in 10 days” or “clear the balance in two weeks,” provide a month and day by which you are requesting for the balance to be paid.

Motivate: Use positive language like “how can I help facilitate this payment?” “Let’s get this taken care of,” and “we appreciate your clearing up this balance.”

Remember: If you're concerned about the task at hand, keep in mind that the patient has had multiple opportunities to pay; this is not the first notification about the debt. The patient received a service, and your practice deserves to be paid. Collecting for services rendered helps keep your practice in business to serve your community for years to come.

Focus: For inbound calls, pen your collection letters from “Judy” – or another designated name, as long as no one at your practice is so named. Documenting a specific name allows you to know when a caller is communicating about a debt. Jump on these “Judy” calls as quickly as possible (“Thank you for calling; Judy is not here, however, I would be happy to help you...”), as this may be your only opportunity to collect the debt.

Confirm: Before concluding, repeat the action the patient promised to take. Document everything in the notes. As appropriate, indicate what will happen if the commitment is not executed – for example, the account will be sent to a collection agency if not received by {insert date within 10 business days}. However, do not threaten what you don't intend to do.

These tips are aimed to help you collect, but recognize that the best opportunity to handle payments occurs when the patient is physically at the practice. Therefore, engage with your front office team to discuss how they can collect payments – or contact you when a patient who owes a balance presents to the practice.

The contents of The Sentinel are intended for educational/informational purposes only and do not constitute legal advice. Policyholders are urged to consult with their personal attorney for legal advice, as specific legal requirements may vary from state to state and/or change over time.