Eight Simple, Inexpensive Tips to Improve Patient Flow

By Elizabeth Woodcock, MBA, FACMPE, CPC

Automation can create opportunities to enhance patient flow, but sometimes it's the little things that make the day run better for you and your patients. None of these tips require any fancy equipment, and most can be done for a few dollars – or no expense at all. Let's review eight simple ideas to not only jump start your day, but also to keep it on track.

Begin at the starting gate. Determine what time you want to start seeing patients – the doctor or advanced practice provider, that is – and back the schedule up by 10 or 15 minutes. Today's schedule is built for the front office; it makes no sense – and means that every day starts off behind the eight ball. For an 8 a.m. start, tell patients: "You have a 7:45 arrival time." Use this technique throughout the day to include the start of the afternoon clinic.

Huddle and sweep. Touch base for a quick five-minute huddle before the day begins, and gather for a "sweep" of the same timeframe later in the afternoon. Focus on quick updates about the coming 24 hours, and discuss challenges as well as strategies to avoid them in the future.

Structure. Create a standard approach to each exam room, with supplies and equipment in the same place. Take pictures of how the exam room should be prepped, including the exact placement of supplies based on the appointment type (e.g., a pelvic exam). Speaking of placement, discuss the recommended positioning of the patient in a chair or exam table so that the physician isn't delayed while the patient is asked to move around.

Construct kits. Develop standard kits for in-office testing, such as continuous glucose monitoring. Buy a large plastic bin, and type out the inventory of the contents. Take a picture of the items in the bin. Tape the written inventory and the picture(s) to the side of the bin, avoiding any confusion about its contents.

Hang a mirror. To "see" around corners, hang a convex mirror. This helps avoid the "blind spots" in a busy clinic that can result in lost or forgotten patients – or frustrated providers. While you have the hammer out, put up some clocks as well. Avoid the ones that tick out loud – they will slowly drive you crazy. It may seem basic, but simply knowing what time it is helps everyone stay on task.

Use color. Signs hanging from the ceiling are common in most practices, but they don't

address the challenges of a busy practices with no easy route out. Assisting patients is your responsibility, but it can be overwhelming if most have to ask for directions to the exit. Use color – a red mat at the exit, for example – or a specific visual piece such as a portrait of a heart – to guide patients and reduce disruptions. Color can also facilitate internal communication – without words; use colorful flags hung on exam room door frames to signal the flow of patients.

Avoid visitors. Schedule guests during non-clinic hours, and never allow a visitor in the clinical area. It's human nature to stop and chat, but even a few minutes here and there can get you off task and schedule.

Use wheels. Although the computer provides the vast majority of the information you require, busy practices still need a form or two (or maybe a multitude of them). Store copies of forms neatly in folders in a rolling cart(s); keep the cart in a designated area in the nurses' station. Roll it into the exam room when you need it. Use the same logic – a rolling cart – for other value-added equipment that such as printers or fax machines (using a wireless connection).

Sometimes the simple fixes are the most effective. Take the time to get back to the basics and you may be surprised at the positive impact these enhancements can have on your flow, efficiency, and organization of your practice.

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