Six Tips for an Efficient Practice



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It's a well-known fact that patients don't want to wait – but neither do you. Operating an efficient medical practice is valued by all stakeholders, but it does require effort. Reflect on what enhances your personal efficiency while you're seeing patients and consider these six tactics to improve the operations of your practice.

Start on time. Time is everything for a medical practice, yet the start of the day is often mismanaged. Providers and staff are scheduled to begin clinic at 8:00 am, but that normally doesn't align with the schedule. Why? The 8:00 am patient rarely makes it to the exam room by 8:10 am, and that is on a very good day. Schedule the patient for a 7:45 am appointment, give them an arrival time of 7:45 am, and build the medical assistant (MA) as a resource into your scheduling system with a 7:45 am booking. While 15 minutes may seem like nothing, these minor gaps can snowball into significant delays by the end of the day. Examine your scheduling protocols for the morning and afternoon start times – with a focus on aligning the real start time for you and your patients.

Monitor metrics. You wouldn't drive a car without watching the dials on the dashboard; don't operate a practice without monitoring the control panel. Query your information systems for their standard report package, and then supplement with data about accuracy (e.g., registration errors), timeliness (e.g., cycle time), resource use (e.g., slot utilization),

and experience (e.g., patient, provider, and staff experience). There is no perfect metric – select the dials on your dashboard and monitor them over time. Watch for small changes, as they may signal an opportunity – before they become a problem.

Focus on reliability. Medical practices operate well most of the time. With a well-intentioned team, efficiency will often be achieved. High-performing practices, however, are distinguishable based on the reliability of their operations. They produce efficiency day in, day out. How? Checklists are formulated for the start and end of each day; standing orders are codified; and the workflow for clinical intake is documented and followed. High performing practices recognize that people forget, make mistakes – and they also often change; therefore, better performers focus on embedding a high-quality *process*. Challenges are discussed openly during "afternoon sweeps" (five-minute, touch-base meetings to review the day) – and solutions are determined to avoid another round of problems. In a busy, complex medical practice, everyone understands that striving for efficiency is an iterative process, and they're always on the lookout to make it better.

Manage the schedule. The appointment schedule is the backbone of a medical practice, as it defines how your asset – namely, your time -- will be allocated. Use it to your advantage – ask your team to print out the schedule for next week (or tomorrow, if your practice books same-day/next-day appointments), looking for opportunities. Confirm appointments 3 to 5 days in advance (and 30+ too, if you have a long lead time for scheduling), allowing sufficient time for the slot to be rebooked. Strive for cancellations, as they at least give you a runway of time in contrast to the total loss associated with no-shows. Prioritize an automated waitlist, sending invitations as soon as a slot opens. Examine your slot utilization report, identifying why appointments go unfilled. Praise your team for filling up each one. For specialists, determine how many new patients you would like for the operating room, infusion chair, procedure room, etc., and embed the correct number of designated new patient slots to get you there. Otherwise, your established patients will cannibalize them. Don't let the schedule just *be* – manage it.

Acknowledge the 'second' practice. Every medical practice is really *two* practices – one that serves the patients who present in-person and the second that handles communications. If a practice considers the latter to be a nuisance, it is rarely managed well. Messages are left unattended for hours, if not days, causing patients to call and message again. Instead, lean into the second practice – understand the flow of work (inbound calls and messages) – and assign a process and people to each channel. Strive for first-call resolution, and look for ways to convert second-practice transactions into revenue-producing opportunities. For example, offer the patient a telemedicine visit, if appropriate based on their message/ request– and bill accordingly). At minimum, review the rules for billing 99421-423, the online evaluation and management service codes. Despite being reimbursed by many payers, including Medicare, they are rarely used.

Love your team. People nurture efficiency; without an engaged team, checklists simply become pieces of paper, processes go ignored, and frustration amplifies a poor patient experience. Hire great people – find the best fit – dedicated team players – and teach them

how to schedule an appointment or room a patient. Competitive pay is important, however, taking the opportunity to show your appreciation is priceless.

Efficiency can be achieved, but it does take effort. Consider these tactics to improve your performance, while implementing your own ideas that have worked for your medical practice.

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