The Best Ways to Deal with a Disappointed Patient

By Physicians Practice Staff
Dealing with disappointed patients is a special challenge. There are many reasons, from fighting with the front desk, to waiting times, to bad results. Usually the office manager can deal with the first ones. Serious medical misadventures are different. I have headed off some lawsuits (I think) by being honest about what happened and why. Sometimes, the patient is too much in a hurry or angry to hear or listen to my explanation, or give me any chance to correct the problem. I have written off bills at the patient's request and gotten sued anyway.
Stephen H. Hanson, PA-C, a Bakersfield, Calif.-based plastic and reconstructive surgery physician assistant

"My best strategy is to fall immediately on my sword. No matter what has happened to cause the patient to be disappointed or dissatisfied, their perception is real regardless of the validity of their complaint. Acknowledge it, get to the bottom of their concerns, and try to make it right."
"To prevent disappointment, expectations need to be set at the beginning. Promises of excellent outcomes should be avoided. And the potential for risk or failure should be outlined before treatment. ...So when things don't turn out as hoped, they are prepared for the possible outcomes."
Mary Christ, MD, a Farmington, Ct.-based executive consultant

"I employ the 'four C's method' when dealing with disgruntled patients. First, I try to connect with them by saying we have a common goal which is to optimize their health. Secondly, it's critical that physicians exhibit authentic caring to offset the patient's feelings of neglect. Finally, honest, open communication is the backbone of any successful doctor-patient relationship."
Leann DiDomenico, a Plymouth, Mass.-based administrative director

"While I always listen and acknowledge a patient's stated disappointment, I am careful not to promise a solution that I either can't or don't want to deliver on. Most of my encounters with disappointed patients usually lead to publicizing an updated practice policy on social media to clearly set expectations with all patients."
Jeffrey Blank, MD, a Crystal Lake, Ill.-based podiatric foot surgeon

"As much as we try to avoid disappointing a patient, it happens. When I discuss my planned treatments, whether conservative or surgical, I take great care to cover all aspects of failure and complications. When a patient is disappointed, I refer back to those discussions and remind the patient that we talked about those possibilities. Once they remember our discussion, it mitigates their disappointment."
David J. Norris, MD, MBA, a Wichita, Kansas-based anesthesiologist

"Dealing with a disappointed patient is always challenging. Some physicians do not want to deal with it. They might minimize it or avoid addressing the issues altogether. Avoidance and minimization never solve any problems."
Rebecca Fox, MD, a Loundon County, Va.-based pediatrician

"The worst thing you can do with a disappointed patient is ignore them and whatever problem is causing them to be unhappy with your services. The best way to deal with a disappointed patient is to find out why they are disappointed. There are several scenarios that could be causing the problem..."
"...A few scenarios that could be the problem include:
1. Your staff is doing or saying things that are making patients unhappy. They may even be behaving in ways that you don't intend.
2. Your physical office is not acceptable, difficult to get to, or is not clean.
3. There is trouble with billing (this will annoy patients faster and more intensely than anything else).
4. A lack of trust exists in you or your staff."
Deborah Winiger, MD, a Vernon Hills, Ill.-based family medicine physician

"... Sometimes a physician's response goes a long way. We can't please every patient but sometimes the way something is explained can go a long way to help a patient understand and be less angry. I brought a patient to my office once after hours after receiving an email expressing disappointment with her care by my office staff and PA. Just going through her concerns and explaining the treatment helped her to understand the plan of care and likely prevented her from leaving my practice."
Mark Birmingham, MD, a Boulder, Colo.-based podiatric foot surgeon

"The best way I've found is always with empathy. The majority of the time patients are disappointed for two reasons: 1) Poor communication (on either party's part) and/or 2) Their bill from your practice. If you can listen and answer with empathy, typically the matter can be resolved with both you and the patient having some closure to the problem at hand."
Elizabeth Seymour, MD, a Denton, Texas-based family medicine physician

"We try to communicate with the patient and get an understanding of their expectations. Some are unreasonable, but most patients are understanding if you explain the situation."