Welcome Patients: Helpful Attitude, Signs, and More

Overview

Do your patients feel welcome when they enter your practice? Have you clearly identified where to go for assistance?

While some patients may feel anxious or intimidated when locating and entering a health care practice, this may be more problematic for patients that are new to your practice and for those with limited literacy. Creating a friendly environment that is easy to navigate may help your patients feel a sense of welcome and encourage their participation in the health care experience.

Purpose

To offer suggestions for creating a welcoming atmosphere by addressing your front desk, waiting room, and signs.

Action

- Evaluation.
  - Patient walkthrough: Have a person who is unfamiliar with your practice walk through it and give you feedback on the feel and navigation. For more information see pages 99-115 of The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Care Centers.
  - Staff walkthrough: Have one or two staff members do a walkthrough of your practice and assess the front desk area, waiting room, and signs.

- Front Desk.
  - Helpful atmosphere: First impressions count. The first person a patient meets in your practice is very important at setting the tone. This person should be helpful and cheerful.
  - Help with forms: If a patient is handed a form, offer them assistance filling out that form. (For more information see Tool 11: Design Easy-to-Read Material.)
Collect only essential information:  Don’t ask questions that will be asked again later in the visit.

Assess language preferences:  Have “I Speak” cards at the front desk so staff can identify language preferences from the beginning of the visit and can obtain the appropriate language services.

Practice brochure:  Develop an easy-to-read brochure using tips from Tool 11: Design Easy-to-Read Material that highlight the elements of your practice.  Include the following:

- Contact Information, including after-hours and emergency.
- Services provided.
- Address and directions to your office.
- What to bring to appointments.

Waiting Room.

- Bulletin boards:  These can be focal points of your lobby that arouse interest, stimulate thought, and encourage action.
  - Target audience:  Your patient population.
  - Central theme:  Have no more than four points of interest.
  - Easy-to-read and colorful.
  - Update regularly:  Assign different staff to maintain and update content on a regular basis.

- Television:  Many services are available to provide health information via a closed circuit television in your waiting room.  When evaluating them, take note of any complicated medical terms or language that may be difficult to understand.
  - AHRQ Questions Are the Answer:  a video that encourages patients to ask questions and become more involved in their health care.

- Signs.  Making signs easy to read and clearly visible will help to avoid confusion and reduce the amount of time staff spend directing patients from place to place.
  - Identify locations.  Your practice should have signs to identify or direct patients to each of the following areas:
    - From the front of the building to your practice entrance.
    - Waiting room/Checkin/out.
    - Billing department.
    - Laboratory.
    - Nursing area or station.
    - Exam rooms.
    - Restrooms.
◊ **Identify process or procedure.** Your practice should have a limited number of signs that give basic instructions such as “Please sign in” or “If you have been waiting more than 20 minutes, please tell the front desk staff.”

◊ **Use simple, universal words.** Make sure signs are in the languages of your patient population.

◊ **Use graphics when appropriate.** Hablamos Juntos (“We speak Together”) is an initiative that has created graphic symbols for common medical services, some which may be applicable in the practice setting.

◊ **Use color coding, lines, or symbols.** These may be another way for you to guide patients through your practice.

◊ **Make signs clear and visible.** The signs should be easily visible by patients.

**Track Your Progress**

- Employ the patient walkthrough technique by having someone initially evaluate your practice on many of these points. After making the changes and offering employee education, conduct another patient walkthrough and compare the results.

- Over the course of a week, count how many times staff have reviewed the patient information brochure with new patients.

**Resources**