Beyond creating a great first impression, the exam/consult time is critical to the success of your medical practice.

The first 30 seconds of interaction create the first impression that patients have of you and your practice. It is critical to get those first few moments right. However, how long the patient will stay with your practice and how many friends and family they’ll refer is also dependent on the rest of the interaction they have with their physician. Beyond creating a great first impression, the exam/consult time is critical to the success of your practice. So, let’s look at key elements of that interaction that can be evaluated and improved.

1. Communication style. There are several elements of your communication style that patients will consciously or subconsciously evaluate. These “soft skills” will impact your patient satisfaction scores in the areas of “showing respect,” “listening carefully,” and “spending enough time” with your patients. Be deliberate about your style to make a better impression on your patients.

Watch out for how frequently you are interrupting the patient and the amount of time they’re able to talk before your first interruption. Show respect and empathy for patients by asking open-ended questions and allow the patient to explain their symptoms and complications. Use your body language and non-verbal cues by moving yourself physically to the patient’s level, face them directly rather than being off to a side and maintain solid eye contact. If they’ve brought a guest with them to the visit, be sure to connect with the guest as well through good eye contact and responding thoroughly to their questions. Stay open and non-defensive in your language and responses to questions. If necessary offer a blameless apology when something has not gone as expected. Always speak in the first person.

Lastly, be sure to communicate in written form what was discussed verbally — patients have too much on their mind when interacting with you to remember your detailed instructions.

2. Communication content. How you say things is important, but what you say in the interaction with the patient is equally important. Work to explain treatment protocols or additional testing requirements in easy-to-understand, non-clinical language. Use verbal word pictures and analogies to explain more complex issues and provide simple case study examples that demonstrate that the treatment protocol is effective (obviously keeping your example anonymous so as to not create HIPAA violations).

Explain each step of the exam to set expectations for the patient and provide a clear explanation of your diagnosis if you’re prepared to deliver it at the exam. Thoroughly discuss treatment options. Explain the need for additional diagnostics and when and how the patient will hear about test results. Lastly, encourage the patient to call if they have any questions. These might seem like simple, routine items to do, but frequently in the busyness of a practice day and the familiarity of common symptoms, some of these items get left out.

Be sure to focus on your communication content and style during your examination time with patients. Increasingly, patient satisfaction surveys are asking questions about soft skills that will be addressed with improved communication.

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