Clear the way for complainers

Sally McKenzie, CMC

As soon as Dr. Chris looked at Mrs. Conrad, he knew something was wrong, but it had absolutely nothing to do with her oral health. Her jaw was set, her hands gripped the arms of the dental chair and she looked at him with eyes that could sear through the polar ice cap. At first, Dr. Chris thought Mrs. Conrad was suffering from a sudden case of dental phobia. Unfortunately, it would be Dr. Chris who would walk away shaking with fear.

Mrs. Conrad was mad. Actually, she was furious. The previous day, one of Dr. Chris’ business employees had mistakenly called her about an account balance that the employee tersely stated was long overdue. But Mrs. Conrad didn’t owe the practice a dime. In fact, there was a credit on her account. It was a human error that occurred somewhere along the way and was not discovered until the call was made.

Mrs. Conrad felt that although the business employee eventually realized her mistake and backed off, she was rude and inconsiderate throughout the entire exchange. So Mrs. Conrad decided she would address the matter directly with Dr. Chris at her appointment the next day … that lucky guy. Lucky indeed. Certainly, it’s no treat to be on the receiving end of a patient complaint, but when someone takes the time to express a concern, vent a frustration or alert you to a problem, that disgruntled patient is doing you a huge favor. The person is also telling you that she or he actually cares about you and your practice.

Although the numbers vary, studies indicate that only about 4 percent of customers complain and 91 percent of the other 96 percent just go away because they believe that complaining is a waste of their time and energy. The good news, however, is that the majority will not bail out immediately because that too takes time and energy. And, lucky for you, finding another dentist is not like finding another place to get the oil change throughout the entire exchange. Most people do not want to leave their dentists on a whim, or the employees. In the absence of an outlet to express a problem or complaint, they are much more likely to bury those feelings. Patients/patients want to give feedback. They want an audience to express a problem or complaint, but resist the urge to use that as an excuse to disregard what they have to tell you. They may actually be among the very few with the guts to tell you what you need to hear.

The bad news, however, is that even though disgruntled patients aren’t going to fire you and your team on impulse, they are likely to vent their version of the negative experience to about seven to 10 other individuals would express the same feelings as the one grumbling — they just don’t have the courage to tell you. So don’t look at it as an isolated incident, rather view it as an indicator of other potential problems in the systems, problems that likely can be fixed.

Be proactive

Get ahead of potential problem areas by asking for feedback regularly from your patients. A few years ago, a major business organization reported that the single biggest contributor to customer frustration was the lack of a means to communicate concerns. Customers/patients want to give feedback. They want an outlet to express a problem or complaint without creating an awkward situation for themselves, the doctor or the employees. In the absence of that, they are much more likely to broadcast their irritations to friends and family and/or transfer to another dentist.

Ask for input regularly from your patients. I recommend periodically surveying patient opinions. Dental teams have control over 90 percent of the reasons why patients leave, but you have to know what those reasons might be.

Therefore it’s essential that you encourage feedback. Patients will feel valued and you will receive insights into any number of relatively minor adjustments your practice can make to further improve the dental experience.

The knowledge gained from a straightforward, statistically valid patient survey can yield major returns for the entire team. If you have concerns about how employees are interacting with patients, find out if those worries are valid. If you are considering a major change to your practice, such as relocating or opening a second office, discover how your patients would react before you’re standing alone in the middle of a new, state-of-the-art, “patient-empty” building. If a few patients have expressed concerns about the new financial policy, find out how many others feel the same.

Drop your defenses

When you are forced to stand toe-to-toe with a disgruntled patient, consider the person your ally, not your enemy. Certainly, it’s human nature to put up the defensive shield when you’re on the receiving end of a verbal pummeling, but this person is providing you with a window into a situation that you need to be aware of.

If you can change your attitude, oftentimes you can turn this exchange into a positive and productive opportunity to improve patient care and/or patient service. Follow these steps.

1) First, stay calm and shut up. As tempting as it is to jump to the defense of your employee, your colleague, your policies or yourself, bite your tongue. Don’t speak; listen carefully to what the person is telling you. Give patients the opportunity to say what they need to say without interrupting.

2) Monitor your nonverbal communication. Your mouth may be silent, but a condescending look on your face is pouring fuel on the fire. Be careful not to indicate irritation or frustration in your demeanor. Remember this is not a personal affront; it’s a business concern that the practice now has the opportunity to address. Keep your emotions and your ego under wraps. If you think of yourself as calm and concerned it will come across to the patient.

3) Be mindful of your own prejudices. In other words, just because Mrs. Conrad tends to be a bit of a pain, doesn’t mean she’s wrong. And just because Mr. Fox is an occasional no show because of his busy schedule, doesn’t mean that his concerns can be dismissed. Some patients bring baggage along with their complaints, but resist the urge to use that as an excuse to disregard what they have to tell you. They may actually be among the very few with the guts to tell you what you need to hear.

4) Take notes detailing the experience or situation. This is an indication to patients that they are being heard. You are actively engaged in what they are telling you.

The key is to look at complaints and negative comments as if that’s the experience or opinion of several other people. In fact, most of the time you can assume that at least 24 other individuals would express the same feelings as the one grumbling — they just don’t have the courage to tell you. So don’t look at it as an isolated incident, rather view it as an indicator of other potential problems in the systems, problems that likely can be fixed.

Begin the process of handling your patients’ complaints now. The knowledge gained from a straightforward, statistically valid patient survey can yield major returns for the entire team. If you have concerns about how employees are interacting with patients, find out if those worries are valid. If you are considering a major change to your practice, such as relocating or opening a second office, discover how your patients would react before you’re standing alone in the middle of a new, state-of-the-art, “patient-empty” building. If a few patients have expressed concerns about the new financial policy, find out how many others feel the same.

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5) Apologize sincerely to the patient for the problem, even if you do not feel the practice is at fault. Blame isn’t your chief concern; addressing the problem is. And don’t be afraid to agree a little. Sometimes a few simple words, such as “I understand,” “I’m upset too,” “What can I do to help?” can calm an angry patient immediately.

6) Promise the patient that you will look into the matter and follow through on that promise. This is an opportunity. Seize it. If it requires follow-up with the patient tell her or him that you will get back in touch within a specified time period, such as by the close of business tomorrow, and do so.

7) Investigate the matter further to get the full picture. Evaluate it and consider an appropriate solution. If the complaint is the result of a practice system, consider bringing the matter up at the next staff meeting and ask the staff for input on how it can be addressed to avoid similar complaints in the future.

8) Fix the problem. Doing so means you will likely keep the patient who made the complaint, as well as the multitude of others who have had the same problem but never mentioned it.

9) Thank the patient for bringing the issue to your attention. Better yet, give them something for their trouble. Most people find delivering a complaint just as stressful as you do receiving it. That’s why the vast majority simply walk away. If you show them that you appreciate that they took the time to alert you to a problem, they will appreciate the fact that you took the time to listen and address it.

For example, in the situation above, Dr. Chris has the opportunity to follow-up with Mrs. Conrad. He can send her a letter thanking her for her time and effort that also tells her what has happened to ensure that the situation doesn’t happen again, and offer her a service such as an in-home whitening kit or a certificate for dinner at a local restaurant for her troubles. I can virtually guarantee she’ll be more than happy to tell seven to 10 friends, family members and colleagues about how Dr. Chris turned around a difficult situation.

Rather than simply ignoring complaining patients, encourage them to share details of their experience. You will receive insights into any number of minor adjustments your practice can make to be responsive to various quietly held concerns. In addition, complaints can confirm weaknesses in your staffing and systems that you may have long suspected needed to be addressed.

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Sally McKenzie, Certified Management Consultant, is a nationally known lecturer and author. She is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its Web site, www.mckenziemgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of Practice Enrichment Programs and team training. Ms. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter, sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe, visit www.mckenziemgmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net. Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at (877) 777-6151 or at sallymck@mckenziemgmt.com.