

## The Patient-friendly Practice / Communication Is Key

Keeping in touch with your patients can accomplish much more than establishing good rapport. Studies show that good communication between physicians and patients can increase patient compliance and improve outcomes. Educated patients are also more likely to respect and trust their doctors' decisions, and to perceive their doctors as being more competent.

**Time spent communicating is time well spent.** Even if you are an excellent communicator, though, ensuring good communication may prove challenging because of your own demanding schedule, or an office staff that is already overstretched for time. For those reasons, it's important to have a set system for communicating with patients. Using a system, you can feel confident that every patient, or potential patient, has received all the necessary information. You should strive to stay one step ahead of your patients, preventing the inconvenience of keeping a consult on hold or waiting on line in the reception area.

One key strategy is to establish an agenda for a consultation. When patients come in, you might hand them a sheet of paper on which they're encouraged to write down the procedures or health concerns they would like to discuss. A nurse or assistant should spend time talking and listening to each patient before you come in, and make notes from the conversation on the patient's chart. **If you understand the patient's objectives beforehand, you can get right to the point during your consultation.**

Simply surveying your patients is an excellent way to assess how well you are communicating with them. Ask patients to rate your communication skills and tell whether their questions were answered in a way that they could understand. Keep in mind that physicians, especially those new to practice, often use medical jargon when talking with patients. You need to speak in plain, simple language to be a good communicator. **Old-fashioned telephone conversation is often more effective than e-mail.** Make a point of personally calling your patients to check on their progress or to deliver results of diagnostic tests. A quick personal phone call shows that you care. Even if your nurse calls the patient, the effect will generally be better than an impersonal e-mail message. Limit e-mail to those times when you need a quick, easy way to communicate general information.

Whether over the phone, or in face-to-face conversation with patients, **it is important to have good listening skills.** Try asking patients to clarify questions and take notes about what the patient is saying. The main thing is that the patient can see that you are listening attentively. Use gestures and facial expressions to make the patient comfortable, as well.

Finally, keep in mind that direct mail and printed correspondence can be an effective way to create awareness and interest in your practice and services. In fact, staying in touch with your patients can be fun and easy with "ready-to-use" pieces from Candace Crowe Design. We have developed note cards, professional-looking marketing campaign ads, seminar posters, and postcards that can be personalized with your practice information. Your current mailing list is a tool that should be utilized whenever possible.



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