

# THE HARD CASE FOR PATIENT EMPATHY

by Ross Shafer

Patients today live in a world of stress, heartache, and daily disruptions. Now more than ever, they need the empathy and understanding of their physicians, nurses, and healthcare providers.

## **Who is Winning a Patient's Trust Today?**

The hospitals and medical practices who continue to win market share and patient loyalty know something most don't. When a patient walks through their door, they put themselves in the patient's shoes. They imagine how vulnerable the patient must feel. Not only are they feeling ill, they carry the burden life in uncertain times. The nightly news that constantly highlights rampant bankruptcies, rising unemployment, 401k retirement plans that are evaporating, crashing home values, government bailout plans, escalating energy and fuel prices, shrinking credit lines, Amber alerts, and global warming. These hospitals and practices also consider that most patients are anxious because they aren't sure if they have enough health coverage to pay for unpredictable medical bills. These compounding unknowns dramatically shift a patient's attitudes - attitudes that may cause them to delay paying their bills, or worse, encourage a friend to avoid a specific hospital or doctor.

## **Are You Part of the Solution? Or, Part of the Problem?**

Patients have come to believe healthcare coverage is expensive and far too complex for them to understand. With the increased popularity of WebMD and other medical internet sites, their confidence and trust in doctors is dwindling. Healthcare issues top the list of all complaints filed with the Attorney General in North Carolina. In 2008, a total of 4,202 North Carolinians filed complaints about health insurance, healthcare providers, health products and services. Consumers often have problems with medical billing practices or trouble getting copies of their medical records. Last year in New York State, 7,800 complaints received by the Attorney General's Healthcare Bureau (through its toll-free helpline) indicate too many consumers need assistance when navigating the complicated world of healthcare. At least one-fourth of all consumer complaints to the Healthcare Bureau arose from health plan or provider mistakes in claims preparation, processing, and payment, and almost 2/3 of those mistakes are attributable to health plans.

## **Keep Your Promises.**

According to a recent study (*New England Journal of Medicine* – Nov. 2008) in 2 of 14 cases, the doctor did not report cancer test results back to the patient when promised. Imagine a patient's horror if their doctor tells

them, "I want a biopsy because I am just not happy with the color of this mass." They cry. They drive back to the doctor's office. They get the second test done. And then...they wait. A week of paralyzing anxiety goes by and they hear nothing about their results. Holding back tears, they finally call the doctor's office to see if they have any news. A bubbly on-duty nurse says, "Oh, your test came back four days ago. You're fine. Didn't anyone call you?" The patient's emotions race back and forth between relief and anger. They fume, "Wow! If they let this slip through the cracks, what would happen if I had to have surgery?"

### **What Do Top Healthcare Providers Do To Show Empathy?**

Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey is a Magnet designated care center that is a model of empathy and caring. It's such an amazing place to work, every year, they get over 25,000 nurse applicants for 1,100 positions. The atmosphere is genial, professional, respectful, and loving...for patients and for the staff. If you get sick, you would want to check in here. Friendly smiles and warm blankets are commonplace. Knowing your name and keeping your family informed of your condition is like breathing to them. Everyone from your surgeon to the maintenance team members make you feel important. They encourage you to look forward to the day you leave their care. Optimism reigns!

If you are pregnant and looking for a place to deliver, make sure you visit Hoag hospital in Newport Beach, California. You will feel like you have checked into a Four Seasons Hotel. Soft beds. Charming decor. Most rooms have an ocean view. And, the staff will pamper you...even through labor. Hoag must know that a wonderful patient experience translates into a low cost, but profitable viral marketing campaign. Either that, or they just hire nice people.

At Gentle Dental Centers, a chain of 90+ dental offices throughout North America, the receptionist rises from her chair to greet you by name. After your appointment, he or she, rises again to bid you farewell. They treat you as a valued person...not an appointment.

Bottom line is this. Don't simply "serve" the patient. Completing the assigned tasks (blood pressure, temperature, blood and urine samples) is perceived as "transactional." When empathy is involved, the interaction becomes friendly and emotionally engaging. Empathy implies, "I feel your pain and I care about your comfort. I also care about the family members who are going through this with you." Here are some tips to help increase your patient empathy.

## **1. Slow Down**

Try not to be in too much of a rush. Yes, there are emergencies to take care of and your caseload is always too full. But it doesn't take any additional time to make eye contact and smile. Focus on each patient individually as much as possible...not yourself. Be at least as sensitive to your patients' time schedules as you are to your own.

## **2. Use familiar words**

Remember that patients don't necessarily know medical vernacular, so they may easily interpret a mundane term as something that sounds life-threatening. When explaining something to a patient, try to use as many "layman's terms" as possible.

## **3. Watch and listen to learn, not to respond**

Empathy is paying attention to the patient's tone of voice and watching their facial expressions to pick up on their emotional state. Watch and listen for the signals of fear, misunderstanding, and moments of anxiety. When you pick up on these emotional cues, help them to understand the risks involved, clarify any confusion, and make suggestions for things that may help ease their anxiety.

## **4. Consciously love more people**

For corporations, this translates to "when people love you, they will give you more money." But it applies to healthcare, too, because every patient interaction will either attract or detract from the relationship - and your business. Remember, everyone on your team is a "salesperson" for your hospital, medical practice, or health insurance plan. The receptionist, accounts payable specialist, doctors, nurses, insurance adjustors - every action and interaction either enhances or degrades the way your organization is perceived by the patient.

The passage below from the modern Hippocratic oath seems to sum up patient empathy nicely:

*"I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick."*

If you make it a point to 'love on' patients and their caregivers while they're in their most vulnerable state, you will win their loyalty, and their heartfelt recommendations to friends and family.

*Ross Shafer is the author of Are Your Relevant?, The Customer Shouts Back, Nobody Moved Your Cheese, Customer Empathy, and Are You Relevant? Ross is also the founder of the Customer Empathy Institute and producer of 14 HR Training films. He is a frequent keynote speaker and trainer for Fortune 1000 organizations.*

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