

Dealing with Angry Patients

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As a consumer-focused delivery channel for medical care, urgent care is built around the basic retail principles of accessible locations, convenient hours, prominent signage, and good customer service. But unlike a trip to a restaurant or store—which can be either an indulgence or a necessity—few patients look forward to their urgent care experiences. Rather, a trip to urgent care is more like a trip to the penalty box—pain or discomfort due to injury or illness, unanticipated expense, and time away from work and leisure.

By considering the patient's point of view when designing everything from physical facilities to policies and procedures, urgent care operators can turn otherwise negative impressions into positive word-of-mouth—but regardless of what you do, there will always be *some* angry patients. In the past, the risk was dissatisfied patients would tell a few friends or family members, but today—using websites like Facebook and Yelp, whose comments get picked up by search engines—one dissatisfied patient could deter potential thousands.

When an angry patient asks to “speak with the manager,” the urgent care operator is presented with a unique opportunity to become either a “hero” or an “enemy.” Yet many frontline staff are ill-equipped to deal with confrontation. It's quite common for staff to take criticism personally, assume a defensive posture, reinforce policies the patient doesn't care about, and otherwise shut down meaningful communication in resolving the patient's issue.

Prior to confrontation with an angry patient, front-line staff should be prepared with a plan of action that includes:

- Examining the situation from the patient's perspective—the patient's perception of a situation is his reality, so put yourself in the patient's shoes to determine why the patient is upset.
- Assess the true needs of the patient—anger comes from feelings of injustice so it's important for patients to be able to express their concerns uninterrupted. Staff should show empathy by rephrasing concerns back to the patient, and take a “lets solve this together” approach that respects the patient's dignity but also protects the center's financial interest.
- Exercise self control—regardless of how aggressive a patient may be, staff should never be “baited” into escalating an emotionally charged situation. Staff should remain calm, cool and collected in all interactions and be thoughtful and deliberate in their words and actions.
- Acknowledge and respond promptly to patient complaints—unaddressed anger festers and patients become further put off if the staff ignores their concerns, or insults them by dismissing their concerns as “non-issues.” Even if there is no ready solution, assure patients their concerns have been heard and will be systematically addressed.
- Apologize when the center makes a mistake—this involves admitting the mistake was made, making appropriate reparation, and then taking steps to assure the error does not occur again. Even if there was no mistake made, a sincere apology that considers the patient's perceptions should be provided—“I sincerely apologize for the frustration you've experienced today.”
- Build partnerships with patients—after apologizing to the patient, develop a follow-up plan on how the center and the patient will move forward. Such helps the patient understand his options and provides an opportunity for the center to perfect its operational processes, thus improving the perceptions of future patients.

Following these simple steps can help foster a meaningful dialogue with patients focused on improving the urgent care experience. The ultimate end result should be happier patients, reduced stress on staff and providers, and positive word of mouth—all of which benefit the center's bottom line.