

TOP TEN Patient Service Mistakes

By Nancy Friedman, The Telephone Doctor

Recently someone asked us about the worst patient service mistakes? Take note and don't let these happen to your staff or to you!

1. **Not Being Friendly Enough**

Without exception, not being friendly is the number one patient service mistake. Patients should be treated as welcomed guests when they call or visit your practice. As we've all experienced, sometimes we're treated as an annoyance or an interruption. The Telephone Doctor motto: "Be friendly before you know who it is," is one way to eliminate this mistake.

2. **Poor Eye Contact**

Heads that twirl on a spindle when you're working with a patient is a big mistake. Keep your eyes on the patient. It's a sure sign the person you're talking with isn't holding your interest when you're glancing all around. And they'll notice it quickly. Obviously, Telephone Doctor understands making good eye contact on the phone is a bit difficult, albeit impossible. Therefore, when you're on the phone you need to be completely focused on the call and the patient. Don't type, unless it pertains to the call, don't read something else, and don't do anything but listen to the caller.

3. **Talking with Co-workers and Ignoring or Not Acknowledging the Patient**

This patient service mistake unfortunately happens a lot. Seems as though it's more important to continue talking with a co-worker than establishing immediate rapport with the patient. Drop the internal conversation as soon as you see the patient. Carrying on a conversation with someone in your office while you're talking with a patient on the phone is a real no-no!

4. **Being Rude**

No one thinks they're rude; certainly not on purpose. However, the patient can perceive many things you do as rude. And as they say, "Perception is reality." What's rude? Interrupting the patient, not listening to their concerns, talking on your cell phone when trying to help them, not sounding happy, chewing in the patient's face or on the phone. This is just the start of a long list of 'rudes.'

5. **Poor Knowledge of What the Practice Offers**

If you're not familiar with the services you offer, it's going to be very frustrating to the patient. Take the time to learn about the practice. Know what's going on. If you're temporary or are new with the practice, that shouldn't be used as an excuse. Patients don't care if you're new, working on a temporary assignment or if it's not your department. All they want is help and information. Ask to be trained. Ask for more information from the dentist. Telling a patient, "I'm new" or "I'm just a temp" only adds fuel to the fire. You can explain that you will find

someone to help them as you are "not familiar" with the situation. That at least shows you're going to help them.

6. **Leaving a Patient without Telling Them Where You're Going and Why**
It's a very good idea to explain to your patient, in person or on the phone, what you're going to be doing for them. It helps them a lot and gives them a lot of patience. If you need to "go to the back" to get something it's easy to say, "Mr. Jones, the information you're looking for is in the files. Let me go get it for you. I'll be a few moments." The same procedure should apply on the phone. Never tell the caller, "Hold on." Let the caller know where you are going and approximately how long you think you'll be. This will make working with the patient easier for both them and you.
7. **Blaming, Accusing and Complaining**
It's not the person you blame that will look bad . . . it's you. Don't blame (or knock) the practice, its policy or any member of the staff. Patients don't want to hear about whose fault it is, they just want the situation fixed. Take full responsibility of the situation on hand. Don't blame, accuse or complain.
8. **Not Double-Checking**
When a patient wants something and it's not available, it's how you reject them that's more important than the fact that you are rejecting them. The process of double-checking should become habit forming. It should be a standard operating procedure. It feels so good when you tell someone, "The last time I checked, that appointment time wasn't available, but let me DOUBLE-CHECK for you to be sure." I personally can think of dozens of times when I asked the person to double-check after they told me they were out of things and what do you know . . . someone had reordered and the person didn't know about it. It's a big mistake to not double-check.
9. **One-Word Answers**
We're taught in school that three words make a sentence. Don't answer with one word. Even yes, no and OK are perceived as rude and uncaring. A Telephone Doctor reminder - use complete sentences for your patient.
10. **Head Shaking**
When a patient asks you for something, give them a verbal answer. Shaking your head up and down or back and forth is NOT an appropriate answer. They can't hear your head rattle.

Fixing these patient service mistakes will enhance your ability to work better with patients. Remember, it's the SLD's (subtle little differences) that make the big difference.

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