

Preplanning Your Office Visit with Protocols

By Benjamin W. Weaver, DPM

From the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management, the voice of practice management for the profession.

Everyone today is concerned about the bottom line, and a podiatrist is no different. Many may think that seeing more patients is the answer but aren't sure how they can accommodate more patients without creating a more stressful environment and sacrificing quality time with their patients.

I think we can all agree that the administrative work that goes into each patient visit has become more time consuming. While we don't have the ability to eliminate the "red tape," we do have the ability to streamline the process and to make it more productive for both the patient and the physician.

It all starts before the patient even calls for that first appointment. Establishing treatment protocols for your most commonly treated problems will help your medical assistants become anticipatory—they will know what you expect and need for treatment before you step foot in the room. In practices with multiple doctors, it is important that they agree on basic treatment protocols. Slight variations are acceptable, but the core guidelines should be outlined. By establishing protocols, everything needed should be in the room before an appointment to eliminate any possible delay caused by having to leave the treatment room to look for some



thing. On average, if you or your medical assistant must leave a room to search for an item, it takes approximately three minutes. If a practice sees 30 patients a day and the doctor has to leave the treatment room each time, that is 90 minutes of wasted time. Multiply that by five days a week and that is almost 7.5 hours of wasted time that could be used to see additional patients. Being efficient can either open up more time in the schedule or keep a busy office on time.

Staff training can play a vital role in efficiency. If your staff is trained to obtain all pertinent information, such as X-rays or any other item the doctor feels can legally be done by a medical assistant, this can save valuable time.

Another way to streamline your patient's visit is to obtain all insurance information before arrival. This will allow your assigned verification person to

verify the patient's benefits. By tying this back into your protocols, the assigned staff member will most likely know what benefit information is needed by the protocol assigned for the patient's chief complaint. For example, if a patient is coming in for heel pain, the verification person will know that in addition to basic benefit information, the patient may also need night splints or orthotics. Having the

coverage information before the patient arrives for the visit will allow you and your patient to make a more informed decision regarding their care.

Before you begin your day, have a quick meeting with your staff to outline what each patient is coming in for and what you would like done for them to help your office run smoothly. It doesn't matter if you have one medical assistant or many—reserving 10 or 15 minutes with your staff before you start can save valuable time throughout your day. If you assign treatment rooms or specific patients to staff ahead of time, it enables staff to prepare and to cover for one another if one gets behind.

Preplanning is not only for the back office but can be just as vital for the front office staff. By reviewing patients' charts ahead of time, knowing who has a co-pay or an outstanding balance will

allow staff to collect payment at the time the patient checks in, instead of sending out billing statements for small amounts. Also, asking specific questions when a patient schedules an appointment will help tremendously with time scheduling and insurance verifications.

Setting a goal to be more efficient is critical to providing the best care for your patients. If you appear well organized and prepared for your patients'

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visits, it will reflect in their opinion of your office. It will show your patients that you value their time because you were prepared for them.

Getting started on this goal can be difficult and requires a level of commitment and dedication from everyone, staff and doctors alike. Making a list of what needs to be done and assigning an individual to that task will add a level of accountability necessary to be successful. It is also important to schedule time for individuals to complete their assigned tasks. Failure to allocate time to accomplish the assigned tasks can lead to patient dissatisfaction as well as team member frustration.

By committing to the goal of streamlining your practice, ultimately you are able to see more patients, provide better service, and provide a more professional



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atmosphere for all involved. Make sure to identify any possible constraints ahead of time and address these issues with reasonable solutions. While you may not be able to change the size of your building or other physical limitations, there are always ways to modify and make the best of what you have available by being efficient and streamlining your processes. ■

Dr. Weaver is one of the first podiatrists to have achieved becoming a Physician Certified in Wound Care—Council for Medical Education & Testing. He has completed his Certification for Wound Care, and is a fellow of the American College of Foot and Ankle Orthopedics and Medicine, as well as the American Professional Wound Care Association and the College of Certified Wound Specialists. He is a member of the Executive Board of Trustees and a fellow of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. He is currently serving as secretary of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management and mentors many new practitioners. Dr. Weaver has written and co-authored multiple practice management articles. Dr. Weaver can be reached at Bweaver@aappm.org.

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