

# Will Someone Please Take Care of My Patients?

There was a time many years ago when a patient followed the direction of their physician and accepted the referral they were given to see a specialist. Those days are long gone. Now, when a patient needs a referral, instead of blindly accepting it, they start with research to see if the physician is in-network.

**T**hey also look for reviews from other patients and speak to those in their circle of friends and family. While you as the physician can control the patient experience relating to the service you and your team deliver, you are often not able to directly control the service provided by the billing department.

With consumer out-of-pocket spending growing to \$376 Billion in 2018 with continued growth, your patient's entire experience is vital. It is important to remember that you can control your choice in a partner who will provide excellent service to your patients so that your patient remembers their experience as positive and will be more likely to return for additional services in the future. Let's walk through specific metrics you should be looking for and what can't be measured but is a must—taking care of your patients.

## Inbound Call Volume

First, inbound call volume needs to be tracked. These numbers are important to be able to use as a base number for the total volume as we move through the metrics that need to be monitored. It is important to note that if you outsource your billing, you will need to ask a few more questions. Your patients may be calling into one main number or into a specific number that is only for your group practice. If they are calling into one main number, then the total volume will not be as helpful since it isn't focused on just your patients. You may also want to consider requesting a change so that your patients do have an exclusive number to contact your billing department. This would allow for metrics specific to your patients, and if the need arises to change your billing, a call forward would be simple to navigate.

## Abandonment Rate

One often overlooked area is the abandonment rate. Do you recall a time when you called a company and you were frustrated because there was an automated system that you were required to listen to and then must press numbers before you can reach a live person? Even worse is when you press a button just to be sent to another menu to listen to and must choose yet another button to press. This is one area that creates abandoned calls. Patients often won't take the time to navigate automated systems and will hang up, leaving their accounts unresolved.

## Average Hold Time

Another scenario that occurs is when the billing office is not staffed appropriately, and patients must wait on hold in a queue to reach a live person. Waiting one or two minutes can seem like an eternity. This is another time when patients will decide to hang up and abandon their call to resolve their open balance from the service you provided. This metric will allow you to monitor how long it takes your patient to speak with a real person.

## First Contact Resolution

It isn't uncommon to contact a call center for assistance with an issue such as a bill or a product malfunction. Unfortunately, it also isn't uncommon when your issue is slightly out of the norm, which requires you to experience multiple hold sessions while the customer service agent speaks with their supervisor, and then finally, they route you to that supervisor. During this process, frustration can build on both sides of the phone line and will often leave a sour taste behind. That is not the last experience you want your patient to have, especially since patients

are now choosing where they want to have their procedures performed. The best process is to ensure the call center that is speaking with your patients is informed and empowered to make appropriate decisions and resolve more than 95% of the patient's concerns with the first person who answers the call. By watching this metric, you will be able to determine if the call center agent has the knowledge, skills, and empowerment to handle your patient's concerns.

## Average Handle Time

This metric specifically tracks the average amount of time a patient service agent takes to resolve an issue for a patient. While this is a straightforward calculation, you may need to dig a bit more to truly understand what the time is telling you. If the handle time is low, are your patients receiving the answers and resolutions for the reason they called? If the handle time is higher than expected, was the time used appropriately for first contact resolution? While you want your patient's concern to be addressed quickly, you also want to ensure it is addressed fully so the patient is not left with extra leg work to do or frustration due to lack of information shared by the patient service agent.

## Patient Education

You are likely wondering what patient education has to do with call center metrics. Even though there has been extensive media coverage around surprise billing and patients have been receiving an Explanation of Benefits (EOB) from their insurance company for years, there is still a significant lack of understanding. According to the Tenth Annual Report about Trends in Healthcare Payments by InstaMed, 70% of consumers are confused some or all the time by medical bills, and 67% are con-

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fused at least some if not all the time by the EOB from their insurance company. That confusion and lack of knowledge is increased significantly when the patient does not see the provider of service, doesn't know their name, or even realize the provider did anything to support their medical care. When this occurs, extra time is spent with the patient to explain and educate the process for them. Pathology patients have additional concerns as they often don't know what procedures were done beyond surgery. They may remember a specimen being taken during surgery or at their doctor's office and that it was sent to the lab. However, they don't understand how one surgery could result in 6 specimens each with multiple stains. If your patient has an archived specimen retrieval, expect a more detailed explanation to be needed. It is not uncommon for a patient service agent to perform a three-way call with the patient and their insurance after education is provided to assist the patient to resolve the issue with their insurance company.

#### **Employee Turnover Rate**

While companies will often monitor their overall employee turnover rate, it is important to look specifically at call center turnover rate. Your patients connect with people in the call center. They rarely connect with anyone else at your billing office. Keep in mind that this is generally their last interaction and you want that interaction to be pleasant and positive. While a call center agent does tend to have a higher turnover than other positions, you still want to monitor it. If there is a high turnover rate, it may be indicative of a greater problem.

#### **Compassion and Empathy**

This particular metric is almost impossible to monitor. However, there are opportunities if you are creative. You can test the system when you have provided a service to someone you know. It may be a colleague, friend, or even better, a member of the hospital administration. They can act just like a secret shopper and see how the patient service agent responds to their inquiry. Many times, patients may be struggling with the diagnosis from the service or experiencing financial challenges. The patient service agent needs to connect with the patient, hear their concerns, and be able to respond compassionately while resolving the outstanding issue. It takes a special type of person, along with appropriate training, to be empathetic to a patient's situation. It is uncommon that a patient will go out of their way to tell a supervisor about the excellent service they were provided or

send a note or flowers to thank that patient service agent. However, when they do, you can rest assured that your patient was given the best service possible. That is the service you want for each of your patients from every patient service agent.

Key elements to a successful patient service center are high quality standards, routine monitoring of calls and metrics, continual training for call resolution, empathy and compassion, and agent empowerment for resolving issues. Consider the last time you had to navigate through a voicemail system to be put on hold for an agent to answer your call but not be able to answer your question or address your issue. That is not the last impression you want your patient to recall about the service you provided. Make the last impression your patients have a great one. Monitor and measure your patient service center metrics both individually and collectively to discover where you have opportunities. You may find that two metrics separately don't look great on the surface but together show the patient service center is providing excellent service to your patients. The patient service center experience shouldn't be painful for your patients. Look for how you can end every patient experience with a positive note to increase their satisfaction and loyalty.

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