



**The primary care physician's
guide to growing
patient satisfaction**

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The primary care physician's guide to building trust and loyalty by improving patient satisfaction

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The primary care physician's guide to building trust and loyalty by improving patient satisfaction



Primary care physicians (PCPs) want healthy, happy patients. And patient satisfaction in healthcare can affect a person's emotional state — ask any patient how happy they are if the receptionist in their doctor's office treats them badly. Ask how their day is after waiting two hours past their appointment time in your waiting room. Worst of all, consider how they feel after a misdiagnosis.

The good news? You can work on patient satisfaction. Read on to find out how you can fill your practice with satisfied and loyal patients.



Chapter 01

Why improving patient satisfaction matters

Improving patient satisfaction is good for patients and doctors alike. Here are a few reasons why:



Satisfied patients often have better outcomes.¹



Patient satisfaction is better for the health of a physician's practice.² Satisfied patients are often more loyal to the practice, which may help reduce the need to spend money on marketing and other costs associated with attracting and retaining patients.



Patient satisfaction makes the workload in a practice more stable and reliable. This is good for predicting the financial health of a practice as well as knowing what staffing needs are in the short term and the longer term.³



Satisfied patients don't waste time complaining and can focus on the reason they came to see you in the first place. A patient who feels comfortable instead of stressed out by their healthcare experience is more engaged and ready to work with you on the health issue at hand.

Allison B. Barbin, M.D., a PCP in Baton Rouge, LA who has been in internal medicine practice for 20 years, believes making patients happy has to start before the patient ever arrives.

“I think it’s very important that patients be able to reach the office after they’ve established care,” she says. Barbin gives them the number they can call to reach the nurse without having to go through her clinic’s scheduling department or some other phone triage. And she sets aside same-day appointments for patients who call and need her right away.

Art Papier, M.D., an associate professor of dermatology and medical informatics at the University of Rochester, says he can end up spending five to ten minutes just apologizing if a patient has had a negative entry into the healthcare system at the front desk, whether it’s because that staff member was rude or put the patient on hold multiple times when trying to schedule an appointment.

“Patients are like all of us,” says Dr. Papier, who is also co-founder of VisualDx, a company that uses augmented thinking and visualization to help improve medical decision-making. “We don’t want our time wasted. [Efficiency]’s really important for the process of getting an appointment and getting signed in to go smoothly.” Though working at a large hospital means a doctor may not have control over staffing, Dr. Papier says that years ago when he ran his private practice, he paid careful attention to who worked the phones.



“We don’t want our time wasted. [Efficiency]’s really important for the process of getting an appointment and getting signed in to go smoothly.”

“It was really important for me to have patients saying to me how great the staff was,” he says. “When you’re working as part of a large institution, you don’t have that kind of control over the staff. But I think in my department currently, everybody recognizes the importance of that.”



Chapter 02

Patient trust means patient loyalty

It makes sense that if you have good relationships with your patients, they are more likely to trust you and stick with you. A study published in *Medical Care Research and Review* confirmed this and more.³

The researchers used an empirically tested model to show good interpersonal relationships among PCPs and their patients were big predictors of patient satisfaction and loyalty to those physicians.

They also found that trust, satisfaction and loyalty significantly predicted a patient's intentions to stay with their doctor as well as the inclination to recommend their doctor to others.

Cultivating positive interpersonal relationships between patient and doctor, the study suggests, helps create a clear difference among physician practices and may help retain patients.

Dr. Barbin, who has five-star ratings online from more than 100 patients, says she doesn't read her online reviews but has had patients send her cookies and flowers, and they refer their family members to her practice, which helps her gauge their satisfaction.

The following tips can help you interact with patients in a positive way and have a huge effect on patient satisfaction.

Be an active listener

Active listening is an art that involves not just hearing what someone says, but also picking up on nonverbal cues. If the patient is telling you they're fine but they are averting eye contact, slouching and generally looking sad, they may not actually feel fine.

When you listen attentively, you're also not interrupting or even rushing to fill moments of silence, which is when a patient may tell you something they find embarrassing or difficult ("I'm having trouble getting pregnant").

It also means reflecting back what a person has said (“So you’ve been trying to get pregnant without any luck?”) and asking for clarification (“How many months has it been?”).

You can also use your own nonverbal cues, like sitting at eye level and making eye contact, while leaning forward to indicate that their condition is important to you



Be empathetic

and that you want to help them solve it. Rather than asking a list of rote questions when seeing patients, Dr. Barbin likes to begin visits by asking, “So what’s bringing you here today? What’s been going on?” She then listens and gathers information to help them get off on a better foot. And at the end of annual visits, she always asks, “Is there anything we haven’t discussed that you’re worried about?”

Recent research has shown that when doctors showed empathy, patients saw them as more competent,⁴ and a doctor’s empathy is important to building trust. When a patient tells you they’re having difficulty becoming pregnant or struggling with erectile dysfunction, think about how difficult it might be for you to talk to someone about those things.

Better yet, don’t just think about it, acknowledge it: “I can imagine this must be really difficult to go through and maybe even to talk about. You’re certainly not alone and there are many things we can try to do to help.”

Dr. Barbin finds it also helps when she relates to a patient’s experience by sharing how the same condition may have affected a friend or family member. She doesn’t mention identifying details, but lets her patient know when she’s traveled the same road on a personal basis too.

Avoid coming off as arrogant

The road to becoming a physician is long and hard and not just anyone can get that white coat. Nonetheless, sometimes you are wrong and your patient is right.

Dr. Papier shares the story of a patient who took her child to the pediatrician for a fungal infection on their face. The doctor prescribed a medication that cleared up the infection, but a month later it came back on the child's scalp.


The pediatrician told her to restart the medication and that the child would get better, but a month later, the infection was still on the scalp and the child's hair began falling out. The pediatrician said to keep taking the medication; it just needed more time to work. The child's hair was still falling out, so the mother went on the internet and found that the condition the pediatrician thought the child had had complicated. She brought the information to the pediatrician who responded, "Who is the doctor here?"

"That's not good," says Dr. Papier. "That's something you don't want to say to a patient. It turned out the doctor was wrong. Yes, patients find information that's incorrect on the internet, but sometimes they find information that's right because they spent two hours looking and you only gave them three minutes."

You never learn how to improve patient satisfaction if you're arrogant with patients, so be sure to check yourself for this. Or ask your colleagues and pay close attention to their body language when they respond.



"Yes, patients find information that's incorrect on the internet, but sometimes they find information that's right because they spent two hours looking and you only gave them three minutes."



Involve your patient in the treatment plan

Meeting a patient where they are can make them feel empowered when they're having a problem. For instance, if a patient comes to you with depression but doesn't want to take medication, or doesn't want to take medication specifically that may cause weight gain, talk to them about other options.

"I think it helps to ask the patient to be part of the decision-making process," Dr. Barbin says. "My job is to say, 'This is what I think needs to be done,' but there might be two or three ways we can get there. If I encourage them to be a part of that decision-making process, then they have more buy-in and they want to do what I'm asking them to do because they were a participant in that decision."



Chapter 03

How to measure patient satisfaction

If you want to know how to improve patient satisfaction in your practice or health organization, the first thing to do is to quantify it. After all, you won't know a problem's extent, or even if there is a problem, without first doing your research.

Fortunately, there are many ways to measure patient satisfaction in healthcare.

Outsource help

You can hire a firm to conduct focus groups with your current patients, and look at patient attrition over a period of time. Try to find out why patients have left your practice. Maybe they've moved and it's not personal. But if they've moved on because they felt dissatisfied, you want to keep track to see if there's a pattern.

Collect feedback

One of the easiest ways to get answers is to ask patients to fill out a simple written survey. The key is to be strategic with your questions and include things on the survey that you might implement fairly quickly.⁵ For instance, if you see that patients are not happy with the way the front desk staff is treating them, it could be time for a staff meeting to address this or to make staffing changes.

If the office's appearance is getting low scores, consider new seating, a fresh coat of paint or a complete overhaul of the waiting area and examination rooms.

If you yourself are coming across as an uncaring, rushed or curt physician, it's time to slow down, practice some active listening and flex your empathy muscles.

Sample survey

Not sure what to include among your questions? The American Academy of Family Physicians has a [sample survey](#) you can use as a starting point.

Monitor online reviews

Monitoring online reviews is another important way to measure patient satisfaction. A survey of more than 30,000 healthcare consumers showed that 44% searched for health information online, with women one and a half times more likely than men to use online information.⁶

Keeping track of online reviews can give you a good idea of how to improve patient satisfaction in your practice and how many patients feel dissatisfied enough to post about it.

Additionally, a recent article in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* found that negative online reviews can reflect variables that remain outside of a good physician's control, such as how challenging they may find parking at their clinic or how long the wait times are to see the doctor. This data underscores the importance of healthcare organizations and their physicians not only being aware of what patients are posting on social media about them, but also that they're proactive about managing their online reputation.⁷



“Keeping track of online reviews can give you a good idea of how to improve patient satisfaction in your practice and how many patients feel dissatisfied enough to post about it.”



Chapter 04

How to stay on top of your online reputation

When looking for a new doctor, 84% of consumers look at review sites online, so you want to make sure your online reputation shines.⁸

If it doesn't, improving patient satisfaction can sometimes be as simple as responding to negative online reviews. But you can't do that if you're not monitoring the websites on which patients post about you and your practice.

Some physicians do this themselves, or they have a marketing staff member respond. Others hire online reputation management firms to do this work. If you decide to manage your online reputation yourself, here are a few things to keep in mind:

Deal with negative reviews

You may find you can't remove them, but you can pile many positive reviews on top of one negative review, forcing it to the bottom of a search (where it's possible prospective patients won't see it — or at least it won't scare them off). Ask patients who seem pleased at the end of the visit if they could leave a review on whichever site hosts that negative review.

Respond to every review on Google and Yelp

If the patient is happy, tell them you're glad and you look forward to seeing them for their next checkup. If they're not, don't discuss details in a public forum. Instead, say you're sorry they had that experience and invite them to call the office so you can try to make amends.

Create a custom alert for your name and the name of your practice

Search engines like Google let you set custom alerts. That way, the minute someone mentions you in a review online or in any news, the alert notifies you immediately, and you're not the last to know.



Chapter 05

Value-based care is good for patient satisfaction

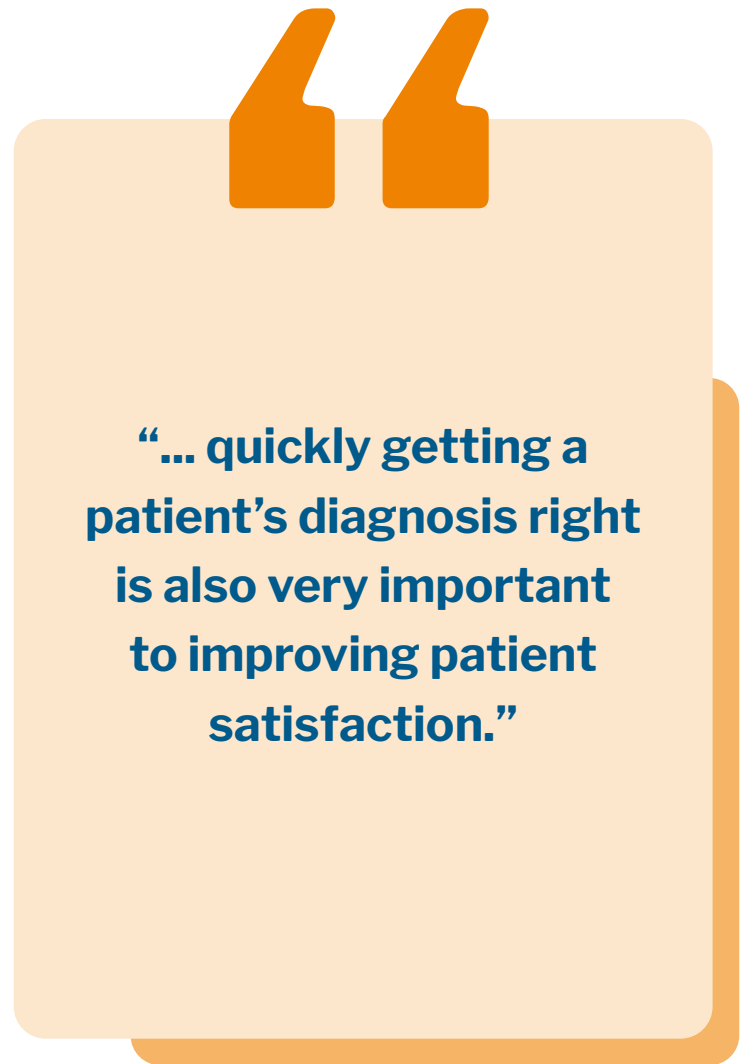
Sick patients want their doctors to order the tests that make the most sense when it comes to their symptoms. They don't want unnecessary tests to boost their doctor's bottom line, which is what fee-for-service systems can sometimes reward.

Sick patients also want to receive the most effective therapies. Nobody wants to waste time or to suffer for any longer than necessary from agonizing or even just unpleasant symptoms. This means that quickly getting a patient's diagnosis right is also very important to improving patient satisfaction.

"When you start designing a system around quality, then you see better results and you see happier patients," Dr. Papier says. "I think it's clear to many that we have made misaligned incentives in a fee-for-service system."

Much of Dr. Papier's work centers around clinical decision-making using digital images to show variations of disease, lending access to specialty-level knowledge for challenging diagnoses, diagnostic errors and diagnostic accuracy. "There's nothing that frustrates patients more than being treated for the wrong thing," he says, pointing to an iceberg as a metaphor for quality and safety in healthcare.

The tip of the iceberg would be things like wrong-site surgery, medication mistakes



"... quickly getting a patient's diagnosis right is also very important to improving patient satisfaction."

and sepsis from improper hand-washing. But a great mass of the iceberg would be made up of cognitive mistakes in care delivery, which includes diagnostic errors, inappropriate tests and incorrect therapies.

"We tend not to measure that well, but we need to drive better care by getting it right and getting it right the first time," Dr. Papier says.



Chapter 06

Implement a patient satisfaction action plan

Improving patient satisfaction can prove as simple as creating a patient satisfaction action plan. This may vary from practice to practice as each plan addresses a practice's specific situation and goals. Below is a sample action plan you can adapt to your own needs.

Goal: Improve your practice's patient satisfaction

Over the next six months, this could mean cutting down on patient attrition, getting more positive online reviews and increasing your number of new patients.

01

Task: Send out a simple patient satisfaction survey

A survey is a very easy and low-cost way to start gathering important data on patient perspectives.

- **Person responsible:** Jane in the business office.
- **By when:** Day after tomorrow.
- **Resources needed:** Sample patient satisfaction survey in this e-book, time and Jane.
- **How to measure this:** Track how many surveys patients return against how many you send out and see what they're saying about your practice.

02

Task: Sign up for a communication skills workshop

You can find one for physicians through an organization like the American Medical Association or the American Academy of Family Physicians.

- **Person responsible:** You.
- **By when:** Next month.
- **Resources needed:** Time, money.
- **How to measure this:** If there's improvement in your soft skills from patient survey results. Over time, look at your patient attrition rates and see if they have decreased.

03

Task: Consider hiring an outside agency to create a search engine optimized website

Tell your story, share updates with patients and post patient reviews while also making it easy for local patients to come across your practice when searching the internet.

- **Person responsible:** Scott in the business office.
- **By when:** Next week.
- **Resources needed:** Time and Scott.
- **How to measure this:** We sign a contract with an agency and have our website underway.

04

Task: Monitor and respond to online reviews

Find reviews on Healthgrades and Yelp and set up a Google alert for the practice's name and physician names to monitor mentions elsewhere.

- **Person responsible:** Scott in the business office.
- **By when:** Next week, and then continued on a weekly basis.
- **Resources needed:** Time and Scott.
- **How to measure this:** If any disgruntled patients accepted your offer to address the situation, called the office and gave you another chance. See if the number of new patients increases after doing this on a weekly basis for several months.



Chapter 07

Make patient satisfaction a priority



Remember, improving patient satisfaction matters all around. When patients are happy with their experience in your office, they tend to trust you more, stick with the practice and even refer you to friends and family.

Be sure you never come across as arrogant to your patients. Work every day to be empathetic and an active listener, which can make patients see you not only as more likable but also as more competent.

To improve patient satisfaction, first measure it. Whether that means developing and sending out surveys on your own or using an outside firm, listen to what your patients are telling you about

the practice and implement changes based on their concerns. Also, prioritize value-based care as well as getting diagnoses right by consulting specialists for cases that seem tricky. Nobody wants to be sent for unnecessary tests or misdiagnosed.

Committing to making even the smallest of changes, such as bringing more compassion with you to work tomorrow, can affect patient satisfaction. And not only can that boost the bottom line for your practice but it may boost morale, including your own.

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