

5.0 Ensuring a patient-focused service



5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Practices should respond to both the clinical and non-clinical needs of their patients. If you are welcoming and helpful, your patients will feel valued and your staff will experience greater job satisfaction. In addition, the general atmosphere in the practice will improve, making it a more appealing place to work and visit.

Benefits

- Friendly reception staff can help patients to maintain a positive frame of mind in a potentially stressful situation, thus improving their visit.
- By delivering a more personalised service, reception staff gain greater job satisfaction; this may help with staff retention.
- Good care also helps to retain patients. If your patients experience poor service, they may go elsewhere.

Drawbacks

- Reception staff are often overloaded with work: juggling the phones with checking people in, finding prescriptions and answering queries. Providing a personalised service may not seem like a priority.
- Some staff may resist efforts to update their skills or work in a different way.

Value for money

Improved, patient-focused services can be achieved without incurring any costs. However, some optional costs could include:

- training. Will external training be required?
- front-desk cover. If receptionists undertake training during practice hours, extra cover may be needed.

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

continued

Things to consider

Employ patient-focused staff

Staff in patient-facing positions should have certain key skills. Look for people who are proactive, patient and friendly. Employing staff that are reflective of the local community may also help in providing a more personalised patient experience.

Establish high standards of patient care

Identify examples of good service behaviour and include them in your protocols and policies. Set targets for your staff, monitor their performance and hold yourself and your team accountable. Winning staff support for any changes in advance will help with motivation.

Listen to patient feedback

Invite feedback from your patients and share it with staff in a positive and supportive manner. Encourage your team to remember the patients' perspective and take it into account when making decisions that will affect them.

Remove barriers to good service

The practice environment should always be as comfortable and attractive as possible. Your staff procedures and policies should be clear and any rules well explained. In a large practice, removing the incoming calls from the front desk will enable receptionists to focus on face-to-face contacts.

Reduce patient anxiety to increase satisfaction

Minimise your patients' anxiety by creating a welcoming and supportive environment. Ensure that all relevant information is clearly available and regularly look for ways to improve and personalise your services.

Help staff cope better with stress

If your staff are stressed, they will find it more difficult to be friendly and welcoming. Try to establish policies that enable them to recognise and deal with stress. Regular occupational health assessments may also help.

Always maintain the focus on service

Staff meetings are a good opportunity to talk about the importance of providing personalised and patient-focused services. Encouraging members of staff to be service 'champions' or changing the title of some jobs to be more patient focused may help reinforce the message.

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

continued

Tips for customer-facing staff

- **Smile.** Remember to smile when dealing with patients, both in person and on the phone.
- **Be personal and proactive.** Try to use age-appropriate greetings when possible and always ask how you can help.
- **Stay visible.** Try to remain available at all times.
- **Be helpful.** Never say, 'I don't know' without adding, 'but I can find out for you'.
- **Prioritise.** A patient standing in front of you takes precedence over someone on the phone.
- **Be firm but fair.** Don't let patients monopolise your time if others are waiting.
- **Use the support available.** Call for back-up support if long queues are forming.
- **Stay alert.** Try to read body language so you can see if someone needs help.
- **Respect privacy.** Don't discuss patients or their treatment in front of other people.
- **Stay motivated.** Wherever possible, try to give people more than they expect.
- **Always be respectful.** All patients deserve attention, regardless of their age or appearance.



5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Case study

Chessel Practice

Patient surveys by the practice manager at Chessel Practice in Southampton revealed that some patients were unhappy with the level of service they were receiving from receptionists.

Practice Manager Vanessa Young wanted to offer reception staff external customer service training and decided that the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 in Customer Service would be a good starting point.

The training was delivered free of charge through the Government's Train to Gain programme. The participants were required to complete several modules, on topics such as 'giving a positive impression' and 'dealing with customers face to face'.

The workload consisted of independent study, carried out in the participants' own time, plus appraisal by a visiting assessor, who came to the practice to observe the participants and provide feedback on their assignments. The first three receptionists to complete the qualification were the longest serving and, initially, were extremely resistant to the idea. They even threatened to leave.

'We made a deal with them,' Vanessa explains. 'We said they had to start the course and if they then wanted to drop out, the practice would pay the £100 penalty fee for doing so. We also stressed that the practice would support them fully throughout the course, in whatever way it could.'

Once the first three participants had embarked on the qualification, resistance evaporated. The tasks were manageable and there were some unexpected positive experiences.

For instance, doctors and the practice manager were required to write 'witness statements' about the trainees, and the affirmative messages these contained made the receptionists feel valued. The first participants took three to four months to gain their NVQs. The remaining reception staff are being put through the programme in groups of two.

Benefits

- The attitude of the reception staff has improved.
- There have been no complaints from patients since the training started.
- The receptionists seem happier, which has had a knock-on, positive effect throughout the practice.

Tips

- Don't put more than two receptionists through the course at any one time, because you'll need to provide cover for them while they're training.
- Avoid starting the training at busy times of year, such as Christmas.
- Be sensitive about how you introduce the idea of taking this qualification, particularly with long-serving receptionists. To minimise resistance, gain support for the training before imposing it as mandatory.

Contact

Vanessa Young
vanessa.young@nhs.net

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Case study

The Lighthouse Medical Practice

The Lighthouse Medical Practice in Eastbourne saw that entrenched cultural issues were getting in the way of customer service. Many patients expected to get what they wanted when they wanted it, whereas staff viewed patients as problems, rather than as customers who deserved good service.

Practice Manager Amanda Sayer, with her background in the retail sector, believed that truly engaging patients in managing the surgery would improve understanding on both sides. This would lead to a better customer experience. Setting up and then supporting a patient forum seemed a logical move.

Many patient forums are recruited somewhat haphazardly, through a poster on the waiting room notice board. By contrast, the recruitment of the Lighthouse patient forum members came after a painstaking planning process. Amanda used a 'service improvement grid' to outline the aims of the forum and the best way to recruit people, which included getting nominations from GPs and nurses.

From the beginning, the forum has embraced many of the projects designed to improve customer care. One of its first projects was to improve the waiting room environment. So far, it has changed the music, notice board, leaflet rack, magazines and chairs, with more changes on the way. The forum has been given a budget of £30,000, from freed-up commissioning resources, to spend on such improvements and on health promotion events.

'Working with the patients themselves makes a huge difference to customer service. We are dependent on each other for making the surgery tick over and we share everything with them,' says Amanda.

Another key improvement has been the forum's involvement in meeting and greeting in the surgery. Once a week, one member of the patient forum spends a day in the practice, helping patients with the touch screens and generally being helpful and welcoming. This makes the experience of visiting the surgery less stressful for many people.

Continued overleaf...

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Case study

The Lighthouse Medical Practice continued

Benefits

- Members of the patient group are a presence in the surgery during the day, not just during evening meetings – which means that they are seen by other patients. This creates a sense of collaboration and promotes understanding between staff and patients.
- The patient group also provides front-line feedback to the practice on a formal and informal basis.

Tips

- When recruiting people for your patient group, plan the process carefully and research why some forums fail. This way, you are more likely to create a sustainable patient forum that can contribute actively to the life of the practice.
- Be open and honest and share as much as possible with the forum, to create a sense of 'all of us' rather than 'them and us'.
- As far as possible, support the forum members and devolve responsibility to them. They are an important part of the practice and can make a significant contribution to improving customer service.

Contact

Amanda Sayer
amanda.sayer@nhs.net

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Case study

The Barton Surgery

The Barton Surgery is the only practice in the seaside town of Dawlish in Devon. It has ten doctors and 13,000 patients. During the holiday season, pressure mounts because the practice has to deal with more patients with fewer clinicians available.

When staff were under pressure, Practice Manager Janine Payne noticed that customer service levels slipped. Using her experience in the private sector, she began to focus on customer care during the practice's quarterly training sessions. These take place when the practice closes on Thursday afternoons to carry out staff training.

In these customer service sessions, staff discuss best practice in private sector customer care and talk about how it can be applied in the scenarios that they encounter every day.

Topics include:

- Don't use the phone when someone is waiting at the front desk.
- Always maintain eye contact.
- Try to make each person feel like they're the only person in the world.
- Don't judge anyone on their appearance.
- Maintain professionalism at all times.

The practice invited an expert to come and talk to staff about neuro-linguistic programming – turning questions around so that an obvious negative answer becomes positive.

This training helped staff to be more helpful for a while, but a lot of reiteration was needed to maintain service quality. For example, when there is high telephone volume first thing on Monday morning, it's harder to remember response approaches that might not come naturally.

So staff are given constant reminders. Staff meetings take place every two to three weeks, and the issue of customer care is raised in every meeting.

'We need to remember that our patients are our customers and they deserve the same good service they would expect in a local supermarket. It's about valuing and respecting each other, and it doesn't hurt to remind ourselves about that often,' says Janine.

Continued overleaf...

5.1 Achieving patient-friendly services

Case study

The Barton Surgery continued

Benefits

- Patients are more satisfied with the service they are getting.
- Receptionists are getting more job satisfaction.
- Teamwork has improved, taking the pressure off receptionists at busy times.

Contact

Janine Payne
Janine.payne@nhs.net

Tips

- Remember that nobody comes to work to do a bad job. If people are not giving good quality care, there's usually a reason for it.
- Analyse what is behind sub-standard care. Have staff taken on too much? Do they need more support? Do they need a break?
- At busy times, it's easy to forget about customer care. Emphasise the importance of quality care positively and regularly.