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Reducing Patient Scheduling Nightmares to Increase Customer Satisfaction & Revenue

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The saying "time is of the essence" has never had more meaning for the healthcare industry than today. With managed care companies reducing payments to physicians and hospitals, the need to optimize a facility's schedule of available resources is crucial to the bottom line. A poorly maintained or antiquated patient scheduling system could reduce revenue generated by services. Review of an institution's revenue cycle rarely includes the scheduling system. However, it really is the driving force of the entire cycle. Therefore, it makes sense to spend some time analyzing the scheduling system in your facility.

The most common complaint patients have related to medical care is the wait time. An alarming number of patients leave without being seen because of long wait times, many never to return. This is a great drain on current and future patient revenue. A scheduling system that is properly set up and maintained can reduce patient wait times and complaints as well as set the stage for return visits.

Whether scheduling is done centrally or by individual departments, it is crucial that someone from each clinical department be held accountable for the accuracy of the schedule. This person must keep the schedule as accurate as possible in terms of downtime for each resource and maintain appropriate time slots for each type of appointment. This can be cumbersome to set up at first, but if properly maintained, it can save time and increase revenue in the

future.

Communication is key to an accurate schedule. For example, schedulers must be informed about equipment maintenance so they know not to schedule patients during that time. There is nothing more frustrating than having to reschedule appointments, especially if it is due to error on the part of the hospital. A way to gauge the revenue lost due to this type of scheduling error is tracking the patient return rate.

The greatest detractor to the effectiveness of a good scheduling system is inadequate maintenance. Since scheduling is largely a behind the scenes process, it is easily forgotten. The schedule, for example, is one of the best ways to reconcile charges for the day. By comparing an accurate schedule of patients with charges, the likelihood that patients will slip through the cracks without being charged for all services performed will be minimized.

Scheduling systems have come a long way in the past few years. Most of the major healthcare information systems companies now have scheduling systems as part of their basic package offered to hospitals. For the most part, these modules are easy to implement, maintain, and – best of all – to tie directly back to the Master Patient Index that facilitates appointment scheduling for established patients. Many software companies are even offering modules to assist in the creation of online scheduling where patients schedule their appointment and even pre-register themselves.

Scheduling is a crucial function of any healthcare institution. Without a

properly maintained schedule, the opportunity exists to miss out on large portions of much-needed revenue. This can happen by not charging for services or by alienating patients through the mismanagement of time. Both of these situations can be easily rectified by simple patient schedule maintenance and assigning accountability for the scheduling system. Plus, the return on investment for updating and maintaining your scheduling system will be realized in a short time, making the endeavor well worth the effort.



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