

WAIT TIME COMMUNICATION

In Outpatient/Ambulatory Departments

INTRODUCTION

One of the most powerful techniques to improve and sustain an outpatient department or ambulatory care experience that drives patient loyalty is implementing ways to keep patients informed throughout their visit. When patients make outpatient/ambulatory appointments, they typically expect more expedited care and higher degrees of responsiveness than in the emergency and inpatient care settings- especially if they plan to return to work or appointments following their care. At PRC, we often see wait times emerge as a key driver for outpatient and ambulatory care experiences. While what is deemed an acceptable wait time varies from individual to individual, we have designed this resource based on our work with many organizations improving patient perceptions of waiting.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

While nearly every outpatient, ambulatory and/or clinic care setting is dedicated in some way to enhance process and optimize patient flow through the visit, it is important to remember that setting expectations and communicating can buy patient and family “good will,” reassure them that the facility provides excellent care, and reinforce that they are in excellent hands. Specifically, we find it essential to introduce communication and tactics to keep patients informed regardless of the length of stay in the center, especially if the patient experiences delays.

In any service experience (travel, customer care hotlines, eating out) we appreciate being kept informed. In the outpatient setting, people experience anxiety, likely very uncomfortable or don't feel well, and wanting to return to their normal activities. Among patients' top thoughts and concerns are:

- What is going on?
- How soon will I be called?
- When will the doctor be in?
- I am terrified...Why are my lab/imaging results taking so long?
- Did they find a problem?
- Why hasn't the doctor come in yet?
- What am I waiting for?
- It is 30 minutes past my appointment time.
- I am in so much pain...
- How long will it take until I can go home/back to work?
- Am I a priority?

7 STRATEGIES TO ELEVATE COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

1. Check in: Ensure staff create a warm welcome and a sense that they have been expecting the patient. Inform them of the next steps in the process (both in the waiting room and patient care areas.)



2. Apply elements of the CARES model for consistent communication and behaviors. Demonstrate teamwork and listening to ensure patients and families feel safe and free to ask questions.
3. Maximize perception of time spent with patients. Consider sitting at the exam table height; make eye contact and smile. Before leaving, ask the patient what questions they may have.
4. Encourage staff to communicate updates, likely wait times, and names of care team.
5. Use signage/technology in the lobby and on the walls to provide information on approximate wait times.
6. Leverage office managers for service recovery during periods of delay to keep patients informed of delays and assist with questions and/or any language barriers.
7. Manage up the care team, narrate the processes, and remember instilling confidence is an important responsibility.

KEY PHRASES TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATION

- At Registration... Welcome Mrs/Mr _____. We are going to take excellent care of you today. I am sorry you are ill. We have a highly trained team and you are in good hands
- Our Imaging Center is the best in the area. Many patients trust us with their care. That means today, it may take us a bit longer to care for you than our usual goal; however, you are in excellent hands and you can expect the highest quality care
- My name is _____. My role is _____. Here is how I provide you with excellent care:

- I have an update for you about....
- How can I keep you comfortable during your wait?

