

Physicians' Office Staff Influence Patient Choice and Satisfaction

BY RHODA WEISS

The staff manning physician offices are the people patients see most often during their lifetime of health care. They bond quickly with their patients and are most often turned to for advice on hospital, referrals to other physicians, and general health care needs. They are key decision makers for their practice's referrals for additional services. Their decisions are based on one-to-one relationships, prompt and courteous service, timely feedback, and being treated as an integral and respected member of the health care team.

These office employees—receptionists, nurses, and support personnel—are an excellent audience for communications and marketing activities.

Following are some ideas that Catholic health care entities can adapt to improve their relationships with this important group and to ensure these employees feel part of the organization's health care family.

- Offer an orientation program for new office staff and a reorientation for experienced personnel. Orientation activities could include an overview of your organization, facility tours, and face-to-face meetings with departments they have the most interaction with, such as radiology, laboratory, outpatient and surgery scheduling, medical staff services, rehabilitation, home health, and social services. Some health care organizations even include office personnel in their employee orientation, even though they are employed by physicians.

- Conduct a survey among physician practices to identify these office staffers by name, areas of responsibility, years of employment, and personal and professional information. Additional questions can address educational needs, interest in seminars, preferred methods of contact (phone, fax, e-mail) for scheduling or diagnostic results, and their interest in serving on one of your committees.

- Sponsor periodic noontime seminars at your facility. Topics could include how to better understand Medicare and Medicaid, improved interactions with health insurers, dealing with angry or difficult patients, community programs for target-



Ms. Weiss is a

Santa Monica,

CA-based health

care consultant

and speaker.

ed populations (seniors, women, the indigent), improving the office practice, customer service, and new computer technologies. Some health care organizations offer a certificate of completion for attending these sessions. These framed certificates are often found hanging in physician office suites alongside the physician's credentials.

- Institute an office practice advisory board that includes representatives from primary care and specialty practices. Ask this group to help your organization determine the topics for educational programs and to provide information on how to improve the inner workings of the facility and its interactions with patients and staff.

- Make office personnel part of your organization's "family." Invite them to employee recognition events (they could be honored for reaching milestone anniversaries), health fairs, and picnics.

- Create an e-mail/fax newsletter for office staffers that provides updates on new employees and managers, services, policies, procedures, staff seminars, community educational programs, future plans, and facility construction.

- Offer your facility's telephone/fax/e-mail directory as well as a directory of all medical staff.

- Create a liaison to these employees as part of the responsibilities of your physician relations staff or assign each of your managers a number of office staffers for continued interaction. This allows your organization to continually identify issues and concerns that can be addressed before the areas of dissatisfaction are communicated to physicians, patients, families, and the general public.

- To further market your organization, ensure that the waiting rooms in physician offices are stocked with brochures and flyers on your facility's programs, services, and educational and community offerings.

- Include every office employee in your programs and activities, not just office managers, because they all interact with your patients and affect future referrals to your facility. □

☎ For further information, contact Rhoda Weiss at 310-393-5183 or at Rweiss@memnet.org.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, September-October 2001
Copyright © 2001 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
