

THE ReCOREder

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Editors Note: *This winter has been a long and particularly cold season for me. We didn't have our usual January thaw or seemingly any break at all. I look forward to spring and all the wonderful things that come with it; rain, flowers and green grass. At this point, spring cleaning, mowing & weeding are looking pretty good to me. As always, we welcome your comments and suggestions. Please email them to: Support@corerecovery.biz.*

Maintaining Quality in Collections

Trending problems is helpful

Quality control and management are crucial in any aspect of business and healthcare collections are no exception. This is especially true when you consider that the business office handles the funds that keep the entire facility running, whether it is a large hospital or a small physician's office.

The key elements of managing quality within the collections area generally include measuring and trending error and problems. By doing so, you can see where improvements need to be made, both in the procedures you use and concerning your employees. When you're proactive, instead of simply controlling errors by catching them before they go out the door, it is much easier to avoid making the errors in the first place.

Policy and Procedure

Most business offices have a quality assurance policy, but if you don't have one, it makes sense to develop one. Such a policy can give directions when you encounter difficult times. Experts agree that it's not a bad idea to have a written policy for any procedure that you or your employees perform on a regular basis.

Written policies can eliminate confusion and create educational tools.

What should a collections department quality policy include? It should be broken down into a couple of areas. Some suggestions:

- *Documentation.* Make certain that the appropriate charts and records are kept.
- *Confidentiality.* Appropriate patient information must be kept confidential, in light of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Privacy Standards

Everyone should know by now that health information privacy standards under HIPAA make providers responsible for protecting the privacy rights of patients. The standards govern the release of patient information and include basic information such as a patient's name, address, and phone number. This means providers are facing increased work, such as the following;

- Patients must give their consent for release of personal information, but cannot be coerced into granting authorization through the condition of receipt of care;
- Providers must keep track of all patient access to patient information accessed on demand; and
- Providers must create controls for employee and business partner access to personal patient information.

Difficulties can result if providers continue to conduct business as usual. That is not to say that you are careless about dispensing patient information. But you must be prepared to provide safeguards when collecting from patients.

This confidentiality issue also involves your relationships with outsourcing vendors and partners such as collection agencies. Managers need to be assured that any vendor selected adheres to all compliance regulations and satisfies all current and future HIPAA requirements. Be sure to get this in writing in contract form.

Monitoring the Work

If your department or office is quite large, you may have to assign an individual to monitor quality. If you cannot validate creating the position, the department manager or someone the manager designates might be able to handle the task.

Some patient accounting managers handle quality issues themselves. One thing that you may wish to do is consistently review telephone logs of the collectors. Says one manager, "I suggest reviewing the phone log and doing a random check against what was put on the list as a call and see if that number shows up. Ninety-nine percent of them will. Every now and then someone might transpose part of a phone number causing it to error, but those are easily corrected," he noted. "I also take daily lists and check random accounts to see if there are notes on the accounts," he says.

Three Strikes

Jim Grigsby, CPAM, is a Matiland, Florida-based industry consultant and former patient accounts director. He says, "I didn't feel it was necessary to review the telephone log. We're human and all are subject to errors," he says. "Now, if I saw a trend with a certain collector starting to show up, then yes, I would keep track. I always took a 'three strikes and you're out' approach to these kinds of errors. The steps were an informal warning, written warning with suspension of incentives and finally termination," he explains. "We monitored all receivable by reports and by incentive level," he says.

Training and Education

Education receives a good deal of lip service in most organizations and little else, but few will deny the value of continuing education for employees. In practice, however, education is often given short shrift and produces little or no behavioral change.

Important: Health care collection processes are unique to this field, unlike collections in any other industry. The people in your department may be well versed in the fundamentals of collection, but they may not have training that is specific to working within the field of health care.

This is a key element to maintaining quality and therefore, if tracking procedures reveal some recurring errors, it is probably time to do some educational training. You can focus directly on what is being done incorrectly, saving time and money.

Attitude

"Any fact facing us is not as important as our attitude toward it, for that determines our success or failure."

--Norman Vincent Peale

How to save gas *and* save money

It looks like gas prices will continue to be high for some time to come, so everything you can do to hold down driving costs is a plus. Automotive expert Lauren Fix says you can save from 7 to 49 cents a gallon by using these common sense measures:

- *Check the pressure in your tires monthly.* The recommended pressure is listed on the car's doorjamb, inside the gas tank cover, in your owner's manual, or in the information that comes with your tires. Check the pressure on cold mornings when it's lowest and be sure the cap on each tire's valve fits tightly. Savings: about two miles a gallon.
- *Change your air filter as recommended.* New filters cost only \$5-\$20 and assure the engine of a supply of clean air and thus more efficiency.
- *Be sure the cap on your gas tank fits correctly.* Gas is a very volatile fluid and evaporates rapidly if its container is not completely sealed.
- *Buy gas with the recommended level of octane.* Trying to save by buying a cheap, low-octane gas is only good for a short-term savings. Your engine runs best on the gas the manufacturer recommends.
- *Accelerate smoothly rather than lurching.* Stepping on the gas hard from a standing start or when you're accelerating to pass wastes gas. Build up steadily to the speed you want and save money.

Coaching Techniques Help Develop Superior Customer Service

These tactics may help you teach better customer service to collection staff.

Set up a peer coaching system. Your experienced employees have probably handled just about any problem you can think of. Tap into their experience by letting new employees learn from them. Assign each new hire to work with an experienced mentor and let him or her know you are counting on each and every one of them to teach new people everything they know.

Be a Monday morning quarterback. On Friday afternoon, ask collectors to write down their toughest call of the week. Maybe it was a belligerent client, or a problem they could not solve. Then, take a few minutes every Monday morning to coach them through the call. Talk about things they could have done differently and outline a strategy in case that kind of call comes in again. If you do this every Monday, there won't be any kind of call your staff can't handle on its own.

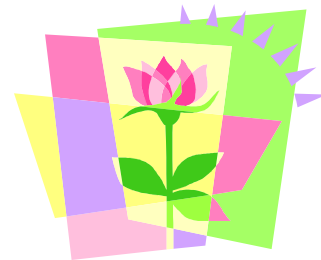




Improve Patient Satisfaction—Keep Privacy in Mind

A health care provider is like any other business. If you keep customers happy, they will keep coming back. They might even tell their friends. Privacy has always been an issue, but it has become vital in recent years. These tips will go a long way toward improving patient satisfaction.

- ◆ Make sure patients know they can call you with questions regarding their bills. Print it on your patient bills. If you can, designate a staff member to answer patient billing inquiries.
- ◆ Establish a private area—a room or area—for patients to settle financial matters. This is especially important to a physician's office. Let the patients know they can discuss their concerns freely and privately. This will make them feel less intimidated or embarrassed to discuss a past due account.
- ◆ Ask patients for their feedback regarding your procedures via a simple survey. That I especially important now, in light of increased privacy concerns.



Sources: “Maintaining Quality in Collections”, *Health Care Collector*, January 2008.

“Improve Patient Satisfaction—Keep Privacy In Mind”, *Health Care Collector*, December 2007.

Disclaimer: This information is not presented to be used as legal or professional advice on specific facts or matters. Readers with specific questions should refer them to their own attorneys for guidance.