

# Asking Patients the Right Questions

Kelley Mulhern, DC

When was the last time you asked a patient a question? Maybe 30 seconds ago? But, are you asking the right questions to elicit valuable and useful information? As a healthcare provider, you've likely spent hundreds of hours learning to ask the right questions to gather critical health information from your patients. These questions allow you to deliver an accurate diagnosis, render appropriate care, and provide prompt referrals when necessary. Is that where your questioning ends? If so, you're missing out on a valuable source of business information for your practice.

When was the last time you asked your patients about their opinion of your practice? About your staff? About your marketing? If you're like many healthcare providers, the answer is "never" or "not lately." And that can be impacting your bottom line. Your patients are a treasure trove of information about your practice...what works, what doesn't work, what could stimulate growth, and much more. Further, most of them would love the opportunity to help you, all you have to do is ask.

## How Do You Ask

One efficient way to ask questions of a group of people is to create a survey or questionnaire. A survey can take many formats and it doesn't have to be complicated. For example, you could have a two to three question survey for patients to complete as they check out. Alternatively, you could mail or email those same questions to your patient base, or even ask via social media. If you want to take it up a notch, try using a website like SurveyMonkey to create your survey, send it out, and gather data. Whichever method you choose, remember to keep it brief - only three to five concise questions - to maximize response rates. Using checkboxes can help expedite the process. In addition, consider making replies anonymous as people may be more willing to share their true opinions that way.

## Be Strategic

Before you start bombarding your patients with questions or surveys, take some time to develop a strategy. How often do you plan to survey your patients? (Tip: I recommend reaching out to the same people no more than twice a year, otherwise they may get irritated or stop responding.) Given this limitation, what type of information (i.e.: regarding policies, products, services, marketing, staffing, etc.) is most important for you to obtain?

In addition to strategizing when and what you'll ask, think about who you're going to ask. The natural tendency is to elicit feedback from current patients. However, depending on the information you're trying to gather, a better source may be those people who came in for a consultation but didn't start care, or those who started care and stopped somewhere along the way.

## Pre-frame the Questions

To increase participation and feedback, introduce your questions with a little background information to provide context. For example:

- "Since my practice is relatively new and I'm trying to help as many people as possible, please help me help others by answering a few brief questions."
- "We're thrilled to announce that we've begun planning for 2016! Please help us meet your future healthcare needs by answering a few brief questions."
- "I'm passionate about feedback and strive to learn as much as I can about the experiences people have in my practice. Since you chose not to receive (or continue) care in my practice, your feedback is especially valuable. Would you mind taking a few minutes to answer four brief questions to help me understand how I could have better met your needs?"
- "We're looking for feedback on ways we can better serve our community and our patients! Please help us by answering a few simple questions."

## What to Ask

Here are some topic-specific questions you might consider asking:

### Products/Services

- What products or services have you purchased or received in the last six months? (Check all that apply)
- What is your favorite product or service currently offered? Why?
- What product or service would you like to see in the future?
- If you have not purchased or received [list specific products or services] in the last six months, what has held you back?

### Customer Service/Staffing

- What do you LOVE about our practice?
- What do you NOT love about our practice?
- How can we better meet your healthcare needs?
- Did anyone provide exceptional service to you? Please share this experience with us!

### Marketing

- What marketing or promotional activities did you participate in over the last six months? (Please check all that apply.)
- Which marketing or promotional events did you enjoy? Why?
- Which marketing or promotional activities did you not like? Why not?
- Do you have any ideas for an event or activity you'd like to see us host?
- How do you prefer to be contacted about marketing or promotional activities?
- Does your employer offer lunch-and-learn presentations or wellness fairs? If so, who can I contact to be considered for future participation?

### The New Patient Experience

- How did you hear about our practice?
- Did your first visit meet your expectations? Why or why not?
- Did you leave the office with any questions?
- What would help you feel comfortable referring others who need help to our practice?
- You could ask questions specific to whatever part of the new patient appointment you're trying to evaluate, such as the paperwork, the check-in or check-out procedure, etc.

### Those Who Didn't Start Care

- Were all of your questions and concerns adequately answered?
- Why did you decide not to begin care in our practice? (Please be honest - we can take it! Your answers can help us to help future patients, and we appreciate your feedback.)

- If you had a healthcare need in the future, would you consider our practice?

Put it to Use!

Once you've taken the time and effort to ask your patients the right questions for your practice, do something constructive with their feedback. The whole point of this process is to learn and constantly improve your practice. And make sure to let your patients know when their feedback helped you to make a positive change. Send out a quick email, include it in the newsletter, add it to your website, or post it in your office with gratitude for all the patients who participated in the survey. For example, "As a result of a recent patient survey, we're pleased to announce that we've expanded our treatment hours and added another acupuncturist to our team. Thank you to everyone who took a few minutes to provide us with valuable feedback. We're here to serve you!"

Gathering information from your patients can be easy, enlightening, and transformative for your practice. Tap into this source of creativity and feedback to take your practice to new heights. Simply ask your patients the right questions to help you to better meet their needs, be more connected to them, and increase your practice success.

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