



YOUR PRACTICE / BUSINESS

The Power of Effective Communication

USE IT TO MINIMIZE YOUR LIABILITY AND IMPROVE PATIENT CARE

Brandon Hoffman

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Being able to communicate with your patients in a clear and concise manner is not only important so they can understand their treatment, but also for minimizing your liability exposure.
- If a patient is not informed that multiple visits and treatments may be required for a particular issue, they can become frustrated or dissatisfied with your care when they do not see immediate results.
- Effective communication also plays a role in avoiding potential misunderstandings or disagreements about payment and billing.

Effective communication is key in any health care practice, including acupuncture clinics. As an acupuncturist, being able to communicate with your patients in a clear and concise manner is not only important for their understanding of their treatment, but also for minimizing your liability exposure.

Adverse incidents can never be eliminated, however, there are several strategies you can implement to minimize liability exposure. We are laser focused today on effective communication and using it as a tool in your practice to reduce exposure *and* achieve better patient outcomes and satisfaction. By effectively communicating with your patients, you can avoid misunderstandings and potential negative outcomes that could result in legal action.

Obtaining Informed Consent

One of the most important aspects of effective communication as an acupuncturist is informed consent. Informed consent is the process by which a patient is informed of the benefits and risks of

a treatment, and gives their consent to undergo the treatment.

It is essential that acupuncturists obtain informed consent from their patients before starting any treatment. This includes explaining the procedure, potential risks and benefits, and any alternative treatments that may be available. By obtaining informed consent, acupuncturists can avoid potential misunderstandings or disagreements about the treatment.

For example, if a patient is not informed of the risks of a certain acupuncture technique and suffers an adverse reaction, they may feel they were not adequately informed of the potential risks and may take legal action against you, the acupuncturist.

Above and beyond the signing of an informed consent form, there are many other aspects to informed consent you should be mindful of, and it is paramount to document the conversational informed consent you receive. Part of the informed consent is the patient both acknowledging they are the decision maker for their health care and acknowledging their responsibilities to the office when signing an informed-consent form. Here are two examples from our informed-consent form:

- I will immediately notify a member of the clinical staff of any unanticipated or unpleasant effects associated with the consumption of the herbs.
- I understand that some herbs may be inappropriate during pregnancy. I will notify a clinical staff member who is caring for me if I am, or become, pregnant or if I am nursing. Should I become pregnant, I will discontinue all herbs and supplements until I have consulted and received advice from my acupuncturist and/or obstetrician.

Explaining the Treatment Plan and Need for Care

Another important aspect of effective communication is ensuring that patients understand their treatment plan. This includes explaining the number of treatments required, the expected outcomes and any self-care that may be necessary. By ensuring patients understand their treatment plan, acupuncturists can avoid potential misunderstandings or disagreements about the effectiveness of the treatment.

One of the aspects that makes acupuncture unique is that providers use pattern differentiation and create a treatment plan specific to that patient, even though they may have the same symptoms as other patients. For example, if a patient is not informed that multiple visits and treatments may be required for a particular issue, they can become frustrated or dissatisfied with your care when they do not see immediate results.

Conversely, if the acupuncturist had communicated the expected treatment plan from the beginning, the patient would have understood the need for multiple treatments, and may have been more patient and understanding.

Avoiding Payment and Billing Issues

Effective communication also plays a role in avoiding potential misunderstandings or disagreements about payment and billing. Acupuncturists should clearly communicate their fees and any insurance coverage to their patients before treatment. This can include explaining the patient's insurance benefits and any out-of-pocket expenses they may be responsible for.

By communicating clearly about payment and billing, you can avoid potential disputes or legal action over payment. A significant number of disagreements or actions taken against providers are a result of frustration over billing.

For example, if a patient is not informed of the fees for a certain treatment and receives a bill they

were not expecting, they may refuse to pay and take legal action against the acupuncturist. However, if the acupuncturist had a financial consultation with the patient and communicated the fees and any out-of-pocket expenses upfront, the patient would have been aware of the costs and chosen a different treatment; or been prepared to pay the fees.

Building Trust and Increasing Referrals

In addition to avoiding legal action, effective communication can also build trust and rapport with patients. When patients feel they are being heard and their concerns are being addressed, they are more likely to continue treatment *and* refer others to you.

Thankfully, we find this comes naturally to acupuncturists based on their deep dive into a patient's health history and the amount of time spent with patients. Your patients having trust and rapport in you as their provider can lead to a more successful practice and a better reputation within the community.

Take-Home Points

Effective communication from an acupuncturist to your patients is essential for minimizing exposure and building trust. By obtaining informed consent, ensuring patients understand their treatment plan, and communicating clearly about payment and billing, acupuncturists can avoid potential misunderstandings and negative outcomes that could result in legal action. Effective communication can also lead to a more successful practice and a better reputation within the community.

As an acupuncturist, it is important to prioritize communication with patients and continually improve your communication skills to provide the best care possible.

JUNE 2023

©2024 Acupuncture Today™ All Rights Reserved