

Communication Problems in Practice

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As your practice grows, you will reach the mid-growth phase in which in some months, your total monthly patient visits are mediocre; in other months, they are great. During this phase, you will be in a difficult position where you may be unable to devote your full attention to the patient sitting in front of you while still being able to answer the telephone; greet patients; collect payments; and make patient appointments. Intuitively, you know that your practice will grow and that your stress and exhaustion could be reduced if you had a receptionist, yet your current practice profit does not allow the \$2,000-plus monthly salary for a receptionist. What do you do?

One solution is to open your practice in an office in which a receptionist is part of the services offered. This frees you from locating, training and maintaining the employee. This is the easiest solution, assuming the receptionist performs satisfactorily.

If you currently do not have a receptionist, consider the following: The goal is to provide quality service with undivided attention to your patient while also answering the telephone for new and established patients. Remember, both new and established patients do not want to speak with an answering machine during business hours. Patients want a human on the other end.

Some practitioners may hire a telephone answering service to handle incoming calls while with a patient. However, the difficulty lies in locating a service that answers the phone in the manner you desire. There is often poor quality control in this situation.

I recommend that new practitioners in this situation purchase both a traditional land-line office phone and a flat-rate cellular phone. There are some cellular phone packages that charge a flat fee for unlimited monthly use. Keep the cell phone on your belt when treating a patient. When the patient is changing into a gown, call forward the office phone to the cellular phone so that if someone calls while you are treating the patient, you'll be able to answer the call. Triage the call as described in the "Telephone Answering Procedures" article, which appeared in the April 2001 issue of *Acupuncture Today*, then get back to treating the patient as quickly as possible.

There is one warning I wish to share. This method takes away from the patient, but hopefully this telephone method is a short stopgap until you can afford to hire someone full-time as a receptionist.

Another benefit to this method is that it allows you to take calls when you are away from office networking in the community. This will give the caller the illusion that you are in the office when in fact you are outside marketing yourself.

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