

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Handling Difficult and Awkward Situations

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As your practice grows you may periodically have to address some difficult or awkward situations. How do you make the right decision? What words do you choose when speaking with your staff or a patient?

Have you ever hired someone, thought they were going to be great, and then discovered after a considerable amount of training that they can't spell, dress poorly, or have poor eye contact? What would you do? Discussing personal attire, spelling, eye contact and other issues with your staff can be quite awkward.

Having a written office policy manual can make these discussions easier. Now you are talking about failure to follow the office policy and it is not a personal discussion about someone's fashion choice or behavior.

So the first piece of advice is to have an up-to-date office policy manual which is shown to the staff when they first are hired. Office manuals should constantly be updated as you think of new things that should be added. This way it stays current.

But what if a problem comes up that isn't in your office manual, what then? You definitely need to talk

with your staff. Ignoring the problem (hoping it will magically improve on its own) will only make matters worse.

The first step to addressing a difficult or awkward staff problem is to review the staff person's overall job performance. If performance is not where it needs to be, you have a much broader situation to deal with and you may even need to look at letting the person go.

Firing a staff person can be difficult. However, when you are in a state that has an "at will" employment law, it means that you do not have to give a reason for dismissing someone. Attorneys often recommend that the best way to deal with a difficult situation is simply to let the person know their services are no longer required,

get their key and give them their final paycheck and escort them off the premises.

Now, let's say that the staff person's overall performance is excellent. The next question to ask yourself is how critical is it that the problem be resolved? Is it just a "personal preference" of yours or is it something that can impact the practice? If it can have a negative aspect to the practice, that is how it should be explained to the person.

For example, let's take poor eye contact. A vision therapist with poor eye contact is potentially a problem. (For the moment, let's assume that the poor eye contact is not due to strabismus.) So how do you address it? You need to explain that parents bring their children to the office to help them gain better visual skills, including eye contact. Parents can lose confidence in their child's vision therapist when they don't see those visual skills personally demonstrated by the therapist. Now it is no longer about your opinion, it is tied to your patients' confidence in the program.

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If your therapist is doing a great job aside from the poor eye contact, then you would need to reorganize your program so that someone else speaks with the parents. You could also design a vision therapy program for your therapist to help with eye contact.

Poor attire can be more difficult to discuss. The question is, what do you mean by poor attire? It could be anything from wearing jeans to work, wearing dirty clothes or clothing that is too small, to not ironing one's clothes, or any variation of the above.

Having an office policy that clarifies the rules regarding attire makes it easier for staff to know what is acceptable. It also makes it easier for you to address violations of your office policy, rather than a poor fashion choice. Here is an example of an office policy regarding attire and appearance:

Neat, clean and tasteful clothing is the best choice for an optometric office. Please dress professionally. Business casual is acceptable attire for our office. No shorts, short skirts, jeans, tight clothing, sleeveless shirts or anything of a provocative nature are allowed.

Our close contact with patients makes it all the more important that each of us pays particular attention to personal hygiene. Inappropriate appearance and dress will not be tolerated, i.e., pierced nose, eyebrows, tongue or lips. Visible tattoos, dying of hair in wild colors, etc. is not acceptable. Employees will be sent home to correct any type of appearance that is inappropriate without pay for the time required to change and return to work. Small, lightweight jewelry is OK.

Men are to be clean-shaven or wear neatly trimmed mustaches, beards, and sideburns.

Hair must be clean, well trimmed, and well groomed.

Nails are to be manicured and of a length that does not interfere with your duties.

When you have an excellent employee who is having difficulty dressing appropriately, the first action is to refer to the office manual. If it continues to be a problem, it may be necessary to have uniforms for the entire staff. There are an incredible variety of great uniforms available.

Firing a Patient

OK, so office policy works well when the problem relates to your staff. But what do you do if you have a patient you want to dismiss from the practice?

One type of patient that should be fired from the practice is the troublesome patient who tries to

make you feel inferior. They emphasize mistakes and may even cause you or your staff to make mistakes due to their negative nature. This is the patient who makes you and/or your staff cringe when you see their name on the appointment schedule.

The appropriate steps for you to take will vary depending on when you decide to let the patient go. It is much easier to let a patient go if they haven't paid you for anything. Once money changes hands, it becomes more difficult; especially if your cash flow is tight.

As a general rule, when a patient who has paid you for a product or service is very vocal about not being happy (for any real or imagined reason), does not respond no matter what you say or do, and it is obvious you cannot resolve their concerns your best approach is to fire the patient. Tell the patient that your office will not be able to help them and then promptly give him/her a full refund. It is giving the full refund that puts you in control and allows you to dismiss the patient.

The general guideline in addressing this type of patient situation is to make it about the patient: "It is obvious we do not have what you need..." "We think you will be happier going to a different office..." "Let me refer you to a colleague who can better meet your needs."

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After you fire the patient, write a referral letter to an appropriate colleague and send a copy of this letter to the patient as well as placing a copy in their file. Depending upon the patient, it may be wise to send this letter in such a way that certifies it was delivered.

Your rule of thumb when dealing with staff is to explain how various behaviors and appearance affect patients, the practice, quality of care and/or violates office policy.

When you are not certain about what to do, it is wise to seek professional guidance from a consultant or legal resource.

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