

How to say 'no' to inappropriate patient requests

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Although we may want to say “yes” when our patients ask us for certain medications, work excuses, etc, often it is more appropriate to say “no” because the conditions do not support those requests. Saying no to a patient usually is not a comfortable experience, but we should not say yes to avoid hurting their feelings, damaging our rapport with them, or having them post potential negative reviews about us. For many of us, saying no is a skill that does not come naturally. For some, bluntly telling a patient no may work, but this approach is more likely to be ineffective. At the same time, saying no in an equivocal manner may weaken our patients’ confidence in us and could be displeasing for both our patients and us.^{1,2}

We should say no in an “effective, professional manner that fosters good patient care and preserves the therapeutic relationship, while supporting physician well-being.”¹ In this article, I provide practical tips for saying no to inappropriate patient requests in an emphatic manner so that we can feel more empowered and less uncomfortable.

Acknowledge and analyze your discomfort.

Before saying no, recognize that you are feeling uncomfortable with your patient’s inappropriate request. This uncomfortable feeling is a probable cue that there is likely no appropriate context for their request, ie, saying yes would be poor medical care, illegal, against policy, etc.^{1,3} In most cases, you should be able to identify the reason(s) your patient’s request feels inappropriate and uncomfortable.

Gather information and provide an explanation. Ask your patient for more infor-

mation about their request so you can determine if there are any underlying factors and if any additional information is needed.³ Once you decide to say no, explain why. Your explanation should be brief, because lengthy explanations might create room for debate (which could be exhausting and/or time-consuming), lead to giving in to their inappropriate request, and/or lead them to become more frustrated and misunderstood.¹

Be empathetic, and re-establish rapport.

After declining a patient’s request, you may have to use empathy to re-establish rapport if it has been damaged. After being told no, your patient may feel frustrated or powerless. Acknowledge their feelings with statements such as “I know this is not what you wanted to hear” or “I can see you are irritated.” Accept your patient’s negative emotions, rather than minimizing them or trying to fix them.^{1,3}

References

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