

Pearls

Alex Vuckovic, MD, on

Return phone calls, remain calm, and invest in good billing software

Whether you've just completed your residency or have been in practice for years, attention to small details can make or break a practice.

The following five tips can help you start—or improve upon—a successful practice:

1. Spell out your billing procedures in writing. List specific fees (eg, consultation fee, 45-minute therapy visit, 15- to 20-minute medical evaluation) and payment schedules.

Do not let patients say, “I’m insured, don’t worry about it.” Instead, send your fee schedule to the patient with a letter stating that he or she may submit your invoice to his or her insurer. Make sure your invoice includes applicable CPT and diagnostic codes so that the insurer will accept it.

2. Obtain billing software, especially if you employ minimal office help. You’ll need to generate insurance-based invoices on paper and to episodically (weekly to monthly) print out patient bills in batches, depending on your practice’s size and caseload.

Good billing programs cost between \$500 and several thousand dollars. Psychological services catalogs and the back pages of specialty journals contain advertisements for such programs.

3. Return phone calls. This may seem basic, but patients expect their doctors to get back to them the same day.

Also, make sure patients know how and when to reach you. Each morning I change my phone message to indicate—in addition to emergency instructions—whether I will be in the office, when patients can expect a return phone call, and the last time the voice mail will be checked that

day. This sets appropriate expectations and reassures the patient that you will be there for him or her.

4. Be nice to referral sources and to your staff. Niceness is a remarkably powerful tool that can help you forge valuable professional relationships and assist you clinically.

Of course, being nice is not always easy, but remaining congenial amid the pressures and unpredictability of psychiatric practice can create a sense of calm. Your patients and staff will appreciate this.

5. Provide consultation reports—typewritten and timely—to referral sources. Many doctors keep typed records of all office encounters. Thoroughly documenting the first meeting with a patient is particularly important to establish rapport with referral sources and to refresh your memory of the case when the patient reappears after a hiatus. These reports also help justify consultation fees.

As you construct your notes, remember that patients have the right to review their medical records. A respectful tone free of potentially pejorative phrases (especially when axis II formulations are involved) is key. Do not sugarcoat or avoid difficult clinical information; simply put yourself in the patient’s shoes when you proofread your consultation.

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