

Practice Policy: Handling Patient/Family Complaints/Grievances

Purpose: In order to balance the needs of patients and families with the needs of the practice and the practice team, this policy is intended to offer guidance on handling patients and family members who communicate dissatisfaction or express a grievance with the practice.

Premise: All practice team members have the right to expect being treated with respect and to feel safe in their work environment. This includes from colleagues, supervisors, and families. Similarly, all patients and families have the right to expect being treated with respect and to feel safe in our practice environment.

Patient/Family Feedback: The practice is committed to continuous improvement and welcomes ongoing Patient/Family Feedback both positive and negative. Please see appropriate Patient/Family Feedback Policy.

Safe and Effective Care: Our practice has care guidelines and policies that are based on evidence-based practices in order to provide safe and effective care. These should be followed whenever possible, and only deviated from when considering extenuating and/or complicated circumstances in which an alternative would provide more appropriate care for the patient.

PRACTICE TEAM GUIDANCE WHEN PRESENTED WITH COMPLAINT

Action Steps: What to do when presented with a parent/family member who expresses dissatisfaction or has a grievance with the practice.

1. If in person and in a public location, politely ask the person to move to a less public place in the office. *"I'm happy to assist. Would you kindly follow me to Room 7 so that I might explore the best way to assist you?"*
2. If on the phone, and you are in a public location, politely ask the person to pause for a moment so that you can get to a more private location. *"I'm happy to assist you. May I place you on a brief hold so that I can get to a phone location where I am better able to assist you?"*
3. If electronic or mail correspondence, forward the information to the Office Manager.

Acknowledge, Empathize and Listen:

Not every team member is comfortable or accomplished at handling conflicts. If you do not feel that you can appropriately handle the situation, ask the Office Manager or a physician for assistance

Any response whether in person, on the phone, or via electronic or written communication should first **acknowledge** the person's complaint. *"I want to acknowledge that I hear you and that you have a concern/complaint about x. Our practice takes all feedback seriously."*

After making sure to acknowledge that you "hear" the person's complaint, it's appropriate to **Empathize** and acknowledge their feelings and apologize for them being upset/concerned. Do

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not apologize for what happened unless you were specifically responsible for their grievances, are in a position to rectify the problem, and are comfortable doing so. Alternatively, you might say, *"I am sorry that you are so upset about this situation."*

In a location that is appropriate, the next step is to **Listen**, make sure the patient/parent feels heard and collect as much information as possible. *"Thank you so much for allowing us to get to an appropriate place to continue this conversation. Can you tell me more about what happened and what your concerns are so that I can better understand and assist you?"*

Part of reflective listening is to allow the person to finish, and then regroup and affirm what you have heard. *"Thank you so much for explaining this to me. Just to make sure I understand your concerns clearly, I'd like to repeat back what I heard so that you can confirm."*

Next Steps:

IF there is something that you could do immediately to help rectify the concern, the team member is empowered to act accordingly. For example: someone who has been waiting a long time for an appointment and must leave, offer to see if there is another provider who can see them or offer to accommodate their schedule for a future appointment.

IF there is nothing that you can do to immediately rectify the concern, assure the person that the practice will take their complaint/concern seriously and either the Office Manager or one of the physicians will reach out to them within 2 business days. Please get appropriate and preferred methods of contact and forward accordingly.

Document the conversation on paper and provide to the Office Manager.

In cases of foul language or threatening words or behavior:

On the phone: give a warning and then hang up if the verbal abuse continues. *"I'm sorry, our practice does not participate in conversations that include foul or threatening language. I politely ask you to speak respectfully or I am going to be forced to hang up."* If it continues, simply say, *"Per my warning, since the language continues to be foul/threatening, I am hanging up now. Goodbye."* Report the contact immediately to the Office Manager or one of the physicians.

In person: give a warning and then walk away if the verbal abuse continues. *I'm sorry, our practice does not participate in conversations that include foul or threatening language. I politely ask you to speak respectfully or I am going to be forced to walk away."* If it continues, simply say, *"Per my warning, since the language continues to be foul/threatening, I am walking away."* Immediately obtain the assistance of the Office Manager or one of the physicians.

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In cases of fear for safety of team members or patients/families in the office: call 911 and act accordingly to ensure the safety of occupants.

In cases where the behavior of a parent/caregiver raise potential safety concerns for a child: work with the Office Manager or physician to involve appropriate Child Protective Services.

PRACTICE TEAM GUIDANCE WHEN EXPECTATIONS CONFLICT WITH PRACTICE POLICY

Patient/Family Disagreement with Office Policies and/or Safe and Effective Care: There will be times when patients/families disagree with office policies and/or office protocols for safe and effective care. When this happens, the practice will follow stepwise guidance. All decisions regarding escalation will be a shared decision between the lead physicians with input from the Office Manager and other team members as appropriate.

Step 1: The Office Manager or Physician will provide information to the patient/family on where their expectation is in conflict with office policy or best practice. The Office Manager or Physician will use educational resources, including information on the practice website or copies of practice policy where appropriate, in an attempt to foster better understanding.

Step 2: If the patient/family continues to insist on deviating from practice policies, The Office Manager or Physician will communicate to the patient/family:

- Outlining the difference between the patient/family request/expectation and the practice policy
- Referencing the original communication (including date)
- Offering to transfer records to a different PCP if the patient/family feels the practice is no longer a good fit for their family
- Warning the patient/family that if a third request is made which is not in keeping with practice policy/safe and effective care guidelines, that they may be asked to find a different practice whose philosophies are in keeping with their own

Step 3: If the patient/family continues to insist on deviating from practice policies, The Office Manager or Physician will communicate to the patient/family via certified mail:

- Outlining the difference between the patient/family request/expectation and the practice policy
- Referencing the prior communications (including dates)
- Providing the patient discharge letter which includes provisions to provide medical care in accordance with state regulations (see Discharge Letter Template)