

Ring! Ring Ring!

The very first question on ACP's **Patient Satisfaction Check Up** survey tool asks is how long the patient spends on the telephone when calling the office for an appointment. If your practice would score low on this question, you may need to review some of your basic office operations, including your telephone system, the demands placed on your staff, and the procedures they follow.

The following potential sources of trouble are worth investigating:

- Inadequate number of telephone lines to handle the volume of practice calls.
- Insufficient staff assigned to answer telephones.
- Telephones not readily accessible to staff.
- Unclear policies regarding the expectations for answering telephones.
- Insufficient directions to patients on how to access the practice.
- Office staff handling too many other tasks while scheduling appointments.
- Staff not adequately trained on the computerized scheduling system.
- Scheduling personnel trying to gather too much information over the telephone.
- Patients asking scheduling staff for information unrelated to appointment scheduling

And here are some possible solutions for consideration:

- Make telephones easily accessible for all staff and make sure your telephone system has sufficient capacity to handle the volume of calls.
- Next, review the way staff is assigned to answer telephones and whether there are enough staff assigned to accommodate the volume of calls during peak periods of the day. Let staff know your specific expectations about how each type of call is to be handled, by whom, and the number of acceptable rings before a line is to be answered. Written policies should be readily available and specify which staff has primary and secondary responsibility for answering telephones. When staff has multiple responsibilities, they need to know what priority should be given to answering telephones.
- Set standards and procedures for answering telephones. Be sure that all staff responsible for scheduling appointments receives sufficient training on the system.
- Educate patients about your peak times and suggest they call during off peak hours if it is convenient for them. Give them guidance on how to access different services within your practice and which staff handles what categories of patient questions (e.g., lab results, referrals, pharmacy refills.)

- Try alternatives for managing and reducing the overall volume of incoming calls, especially at peak periods. Special lines and automated attendant systems can help prevent prescription refill and lab results calls from clogging your appointment lines.
- Ask your telephone vendor to help you use the full capacity of your existing telephone system before investing in more features.
- Free up the appointment scheduler. Designate a person whose priority responsibility is to handle telephone appointment scheduling, and whose other duties can be delayed while appointment calls are completed.

To find more information about telephone management and other aspects of patient satisfaction see the **Patient Satisfaction Check Up** and *The Patient Satisfaction Tip Book* by visiting http://www.acponline.org/pmc/new_satis.htm.