

“When in Doubt, Err on the Side of Angels”

Plaza Family Care, Hackettstown, New Jersey

Everyone knows the drill: You arrive at the doctor’s office, perhaps a few minutes before your appointment time, and enter the waiting area. An obviously overworked receptionist with a telephone pressed to her ear glances in your direction and smiles apologetically as she holds up one finger, as if to tell you, “Just a minute!”

Perhaps a small crowd of waiting patients have gathered around the counter — some just arriving, some wanting to return clipboards with their completed paperwork attached. On the best days, it feels impersonal; on the worst days, it’s downright chaotic.

Patients arriving through the front door at Plaza Family Care notice a dramatic departure from the traditional doctor’s office experience. As they enter, a greeter meets them at the door to welcome them to the office and quickly ushers them to a private registration area. There, away from the crowd, the patient provides requested information and takes care of any required time-of-service payment.

The registration area has room for up to four registrars working simultaneously, but most of the time, the operation runs so smoothly that one person can handle all the registrations. From registration, the patient proceeds to one of three waiting areas: Adult internal medicine patients have a private area, while children waiting to see a pediatrician enter either their own “well-care” room or an isolated “sick”

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area, complete with a negative-pressure HVAC system designed to protect others from communicable illness.^t

The practice makes every effort to stay on top of the process and minimize wait times for patients. The greeter on the floor carries a wireless phone for communicating with nurses and others in the back office, and she has access to a computer at the front desk, as well.

The scheduling system tracks the patient’s arrival from the time of registration/check-in so that back-office personnel know when each patient arrives. It automatically populates the clinical side, too; it queues the patients into the correct physician system in the exam area. Everyone can see exactly what time patients arrive, what time they check in, how long they’ve had to wait, and how long each step of the process has taken.

Business Office Manager Ellen Meyer quickly points out that this unique system for welcoming and checking in patients didn’t happen overnight. The practice studied and planned how to implement the process over a two-year period. The medical group — five pediatricians

and three internists — decided to consolidate three practice locations to two, bringing pediatrics and internal medicine under one roof along with the central business operations. That process gave them an opportunity to rethink how the practice operates and to completely revise the patient experience.

To counter the depersonalization in our increasingly high-tech offices, practices often talk about developing a “high-touch” style to bring back the warmth and personal attention that patients desire. Few offices achieve that goal, but Plaza Family Care has made several conscious operational decisions that are making it a reality. Along with the innovative concept of a greeter, the practice pleases patients with the following:

Call center. The practice moved inbound calls to a central, dedicated call center at the main office. Doing this freed up registration personnel (at both locations) to deal directly with patients, uninterrupted by telephones. It chose *not* to use an automated-attendant system, believing that patients would rather be greeted by a live person. The call center has four



workstations, but most of the time, two people can handle all the calls, even during the busiest times.

If the incoming volume on occasion threatens to overwhelm the center, the system allows for workers in other areas to back them up temporarily. In addition, the system will offer voice mail to callers when heavy traffic prevents a timely response from one of the operators.

Practice Administrator Joseph Nocilla and his management staff can monitor telephone traffic from their desktop computers, allowing them to redirect calls to other offices for backup when hold times or abandoned calls show that the call center can't keep up with the demand.

Registration desk. Registration kiosks seemed too impersonal for the environment they were trying to develop, so Plaza rejected that technology in favor of live registrars. The registration desk is actually an extension of the billing department, and the staffers who work in that area check patients in, update information, collect copayments, and discuss and obtain any old balances. Further, they check patients out at the end of their visits.

Cross-trained staff. Workers in the check-in process and the call center have been trained to cover positions in both areas. Patients become familiar with almost all the front-office staff this way, and the system doesn't break down when one or two people are away.

Front-office workers can be moved around during the day whenever a particular area needs some help. If registration starts to get backed up, other billing staff or call-center workers can quickly step into the area and help clear the backup.

The practice's commitment to cross-training includes the clinical area, as well. Pediatric nurses know how to fill in for internal medicine nurses and vice versa. Everyone learns to participate as a team member and serve wherever needed to provide excellent patient service.

Management by Walking Around

Keeping all these components functioning smoothly and fluidly to enhance patient flow requires attentive and engaged management. A front-office supervisor and a back-office supervisor augment the efforts of

the administrator and business office manager. They function as "floor managers" and are required to be up and moving around the office, making sure the operation continues to run efficiently.

The physicians at Plaza have developed a trusting relationship with the administration and have a general "hands-off" policy when it comes to managing non-clinical staff. If they notice a glitch in the system, they have learned not to try and step in and direct staff. Rather, they take their concerns to the managers or supervisors who then deal with the staff. This establishes clear lines of communication and authority.

Scheduling for Patient Convenience

With evening and weekend hours for both adult and pediatric patients, the entire office schedule has been assembled for the patients' convenience — not for the physicians. Staff members are trained to do everything they can to accommodate each patient who calls for an appointment. If they reach an impasse, the scheduler knows to get a supervisor involved.

Schedules have some time blocks built in for work-ins and walk-ins. The practice has a robust and diligent phone triage protocol that works with patients to evaluate how urgent their needs are. "But nine times out of ten," says Meyer, "we find a way to get patients in the same day. The patients appreciate it, even when we caution them that we're already booked, so they may have to wait a little longer."

The scheduling templates are designed to accommodate even more last-minute and work-in appointments on nights and weekends. Internal medicine maintains Saturday hours, but pediatrics provides care 365 days a year, including all holidays. Plaza doesn't want to force its patients to seek after-hours care at alternative

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outlets like the fast-growing, retail-based walk-in clinics.

Nocilla makes sure that Plaza's marketing and communication efforts strongly emphasize the practice's commitment to *accessibility*. Advertising almost always features the convenience of extended hours, same-day appointments, and two locations.

To enhance communication and interaction with patients, the practice has developed a free health newsletter, *Plaza News*. Patients sign up to receive it via e-mail. Dr. Allen Menkin, the pediatrician who founded the practice and serves as the senior partner, edits the newsletter and solicits articles from the other physicians and the in-house

dietician. Besides the 5,000 e-mail subscribers, an area print magazine, *New Jersey Family Magazine*, reprints many of the newsletter articles.

The practice has recently dived into social media and maintains a Facebook presence that has begun to catch on. Patients can access *Plaza News* directly from the Facebook page, as well. Facebook has proven useful in communicating quickly with the patients when situations like inclement weather come up.

Plaza Family Care provides satisfaction cards for every patient to give feedback about his or her experience. The administration reviews the cards and notes trends, problem

areas, or situations that need to be addressed. If managers have to field a direct complaint from a patient, they have been empowered to correct the situation, apologize, and offer a "token of apology" in the form of a Dunkin' Donuts gift card.

Keeping the staff happy ensures that patients will have a better experience at Plaza Family Care. Paying the staff well and providing good benefits creates a foundation, but Meyer points out that you have to go further to develop a loyal team. The practice openly supports education and self-development for employees and goes "above and beyond" for special events like their annual holiday celebration.

One of the practice's core values is to put the patient first. "Treat the patients the way you want to be treated yourself," Nocilla tells his staff, "and when in doubt, err on the side of angels!"