
Handling Patient Complaints

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A doctor is a service provider, so for better business he/she needs to have customer/patient satisfaction. Patient satisfaction has two aspects to it - one is the aspect of treatment (which a doctor is good at) and the second is the addressing of the complaint. Addressing a complaint is not just important for professional growth but it is the first sign for future medico legal problems to come. Therefore dealing with complaints from the patient or the relative can be complicated and hard to navigate. Following points can help you handle complaints better.

- Treat every complaint seriously however trivial it may be. Be accessible to patients.
- No matter how the relatives express the complaint (in fiery, abusive language etc) never return the same kind of treatment. Keep calm and listen, be tolerant and compassionate.
- If the complain is true and damaging, immediately take corrective action.
- If the complain is false and mislead, explain the actual fact and convince the patient.
- Never argue in the beginning. Tell the patient the complaint will be investigated upon and looked into.
- Listen to the patient with full attention, ask him a lot of questions and clarification.
- The doctor should investigate the complaint to the best of his knowledge.
- If the doctor or the staff is at fault admit it, explain to the patient in simple language.
- If the complaint is not directly the doctors' responsibility, say so. Explain to the patient they will do their best to find out which staff is responsible for the complaint.
- Never stigmatize a patient for having a complaint.
- If the patient is getting violent, it is advisable to have a security guard or a colleague nearby.

- Do not rush to reply. If the complaint is medico legal in nature always explain with an expert.
- If you have a complaint of a patient with complications get your documentation straight. Double check your records.
- Always note down the complaint in a register and after the complaint is resolved note down the resolution steps
- Patient has the right to complain so accept it.

Once you have the complaint, it is obvious that you have to take action on it. If you have received a notice do not rush to answer it. Ask a medico legal expert before you answer any notices. Following are few points that you need to keep in mind when you reply to a notice.

- Reply to a notice on your letter head with your sign on it.
- Answer to the point in the complaint. Be precise and straight forward.
- Do not make unnecessary comments or commitment
- Avoid scientific terms or abbreviations. Keep the language simple to understand.
- Reply to the each allegation separately.
- Reply in the language which you are comfortable in.

When a complaint is raised it is usually a red flag for a medico legal suit to come along. Though not all complaints are going to turn against you, there are a few scenarios in which you should be aware of a medico legal suit that may come your way. Following are a few situations that should ring a bell in your head.

- Patient asks for a second opinion.
- Patient's relative ask for the patient to be shifted
- The patient goes into complication or an unexpected outcome of the procedure performed
- Death of a young patient.
- Request for medical record.
- Patient does internet search and tries to explain you the procedure and complications.

- The relative of the patient is a doctor and he suddenly visits the patient.
- Patient asks for a DAMA.

As more and more patients are getting aware of their rights and as medical treatment is getting expensive, the amount of complaints against the doctor is going to increase. Though most of the cases may be trivial but it is always a surprise when patient will go against you in court. Most of the complaints aren't resolved due to lack of documentation. TO conclude, doctors are going to get complaints but if you do not want them to manifest into something big it is important that you handle them in a systematic way and have a SOP (stand operation procedure) for them.