

# **Some Lessons Learned Along the AAPP M Trail**

*By Hal Ornstein, DPM*



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## **Making Every Patient Feel Like a Million Dollars**

Your patient's perceptions of their time spent with you are related directly to the energy that you direct toward them during the visits. Using simple techniques, you can pack an hour of medical and emotional care into a 15-minute visit. The assistant-physician team can control patients' perceptions by knowing, meeting and then exceeding their expectations.

As you cross the doorway to enter the exam room, begin each patient encounter with eye contact and a friendly smile. Follow up with a handshake, even if it is a patient that you have greeted several times before. Be sure to give him your name if it's a new patient. These gestures convey your trust, warmth and caring, and often help reduce any anxieties that the patient might be experiencing. By showing that you are friendly and can relate to the patient, you have opened his mind and ears to what you will say with regard to his condition.

As you begin to speak with patients, place both hands on their feet. Studies have shown consistently that human touch conveys compassion. Begin your conversations with a question relating to their overall well being, for example, "How have you been?" Because this could lead to an extensive discussion, you must be able to direct the focus of the conversations to their particular podiatric problems. This is achieved through more specific questions, for example, "So how's the heel feeling?" At this point, let them speak freely about their conditions and/or concerns. The typical patient will do this fairly quickly. However, if you interrupt the patient early in the encounter, the patient will feel rushed. Once the patient has spoken her peace, the rest of the visit is under your control.

## **Please, Make Me Feel Important**

Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, said that her secret to success is making believe that every person you're speaking with is wearing a sign around her neck that says, "Make me feel important!" One of the most basic human needs is to feel valued. The goal of the doctors and assistants in our practice is to make all patients feel that they're special and a top priority. This might appear colloquial and elementary but it is not done in most practices.

With this in mind, much of our practice's effort and focus are on not just satisfying patients, but wowing them. This begins with training of staff on phone etiquette and making expectations clear. Our guidelines include answering on fewer than three rings, giving your name in the greeting, asking permission to put patients on hold, thanking them for holding, and asking at the end of the call if they have any questions or need help with anything else. Patients are greeted when they come into the office with eye contact and a smile from the receptionist. If behind schedule, patients are told and kept informed of the wait. A variety of magazines are kept current, and a small television is in the reception area with a local news channel.

When entering the treatment room, we always shake a patient's hand and enter with an enthusiastic smile. I've always been quite amazed that patients are impressed by rudimentary people skills. Patients assume that we provide quality medical care, so it's the people skills that give us the competitive edge. When presenting to a patient, we always say, "we want you to know what you have, why you have it and what the options are to take care of it." This statement and presentation are so comprehensive that our patient's perception is that care "above and beyond" has been provided.

When confronted with an angry patient, we approach him with the philosophy that a problem is an opportunity dressed in work clothes. Patients expect that if they have an issue or problem with a practice that a battle will ensue. Confronted with a problem, we focus on listening skills.

We listen to the complaint with our eyes, ears and heart and repeat it, so the patient knows that we understand her concern. What most angry patients are looking for is an “I’m sorry,” which is simple to deliver. All efforts then can focus on addressing the problem and its resolution.

### **Hit against the Best and Enjoy the Rest**

Back in our little league days, our parents taught us that if we could hit against the best pitcher, all others would be cake. Following the same philosophy in your office will lead to less stress and more smiles daily. We all have one or two patients that make us feel like we should have made a wrong turn on the way to work. These patients live to get under our skin and do all they can to create conflict.

In our office, we play a game with these patients. We take a deep breath when they walk into the office, put on the big smile and kill them with kindness, no matter what (within reason of course). Inevitably, they become one of our best sources for referrals. Their referred friends all say, “If you can make Mr. Pain-in-the-Butt happy, you must be great!” We are sure to tell the new patient to let Mr. Pain-in-the-Butt know how much we love him being a patient. This just feeds the beast, resulting in even more referrals. Harry Truman summed it up beautifully with his quote, “Make lemonade out of lemons.”

*Hal Ornstein, DPM, FACFAS is a Diplomate of the American Board of Podiatric Surgery and serves as Chairman of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management, consulting editor for Podiatry Management Magazine as well as other podiatric journals. He is a frequent lecturer and author on topics pertinent to practice management and patient satisfaction, and is physician manager of Affiliated Foot and Ankle Center, LLP in Howell, NJ. Dr. Ornstein can be contacted at [hornstein@aappm.org](mailto:hornstein@aappm.org).*