

Cultivating an Atmosphere of Respect and Dignity for Your Patients

In addition to offering quality medical care to members of your community, your clinic has the potential to be a place of hope and healing to patients. If developed correctly, people will go to your clinic knowing that they will be treated with courtesy, respect, and dignity, without judgement of their status or station in life. This attitude must be expected, encouraged, and modeled by the leadership of the clinic.

Hope and healing does not just come from offering medical care, but includes every aspect of the clinic starting with their first contact whether that be on the phone or in person. Too often our healthcare system is impersonal and uninviting, especially to those who may be financially challenged, uninsured, and not feeling well. Create a culture in your clinic that enables your patients to feel welcomed, respected, and empowered to improve their own health. Being willing to listen to your patient while they vent about the challenges they face in their lives every day can be the first step to offering them hope that their situation can improve. If you are a faith-based clinic, use the essence of your faith as your example; show love and caring to all that enter the clinic by treating each person with dignity and respect.

Be aware!

The population you have chosen to serve may present certain challenges. Because of their personal circumstances and/or lack of experience with the healthcare system, they may be reserved or even mistrustful of your clinic. Your challenge is to act professionally while being respectful and compassionate about their needs and situation. If you encounter a patient who is difficult to deal with, ask for assistance from a staff member or another volunteer. To the best of your ability, remain calm and respectful.

Do not overlook the fact that your staff and volunteers can experience the miracle of hope and healing just as your patients do. They may begin their service at the clinic with the attitude that they are there to help others, but before long they may realize that they are served and ministered to as often as they serve. The process of giving of oneself is often reciprocal. You often get as much as you give.

Consider these suggestions for ways to cultivate an atmosphere of hope and healing:

- Post greeters at the front door
- Smile when you answer the telephone
- Have a play area and a volunteer available to assist with patients' children
- Have translators available
- Practice conflict resolution techniques with your staff and volunteers
- Teach active listening skills to staff and volunteers
- Express your gratitude to staff and volunteers for their willingness to serve
- Use a social worker to refer eligible patients to appropriate service providers

Patient Privacy

Respecting and safeguarding your patients' privacy is as important as offering quality care. There are legal standards defined in the Health Insurance Privacy and Portability Act, HIPAA. There is debate in the charitable clinic sector as to whether or not clinics are bound by this legislation. You will need to discuss this with an attorney to determine your own clinic needs; however, ECHO considers it a best practice to comply with HIPAA standards and policies.

There is no more direct way to undermine a patient's confidence in a clinic and to tarnish your credibility than to betray the confidence of a patient. It is imperative that a patient's personal health information (PHI) remain confidential and within the limits of providing treatment by a medical provider. PHI is defined as any individually identifiable health information. Therefore, any personal information that a staff member or volunteer of a clinic learns about a patient's health condition, financial information, or even their attendance at the clinic cannot be shared with anyone outside the clinic unless it is related to the patient's treatment. Disclosing information regarding the patient's address, telephone number, place of

employment, age, weight, blood pressure, or condition without their written consent is strictly prohibited and against the law. You and the clinic could be fined for improper release of PHI. For this reason, having training on patient privacy and HIPAA should always be a part of orienting volunteers/staff into your clinic.

Your Medical Champion, other medical volunteers, or another physician practice may have examples of HIPAA policies and procedures that can be utilized as a template for you to make adjustments to ensure that it is appropriate for your clinic. The Operations Committee will be drafting the clinic Policy and Procedures to include how HIPAA will be addressed. You may also look for or recruit a specific volunteer with this expertise to head up the creation of these policies and procedures.

There are also many resources on the internet including the government site:

www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy

Simple actions that can go a long way in protecting a patient's privacy:

- Do not have a patient disclose their primary medical reason for visiting the clinic when they sign in
- Keep computer monitors turned away from public viewing
- Always conduct financial screening and patient information gathering in a closed room to prevent others from overhearing your discussion
- Limit access to different parts of your electronic health record based upon the 'need to know' of volunteers/staff
- If you are utilizing paper charts, make sure that the chain of custody of the chart is always known
 - Store patient files in a secure, locked cabinet
- Do not discuss cases or situations with spouses or friends
- Be careful not to be overheard when discussing patient information while on the telephone