



PATIENT ACCESS, SCHEDULING & COMMUNICATION



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Introduction

A patient can have the best doctor in the world, but if they cannot get an appointment when they need it, that doctor does them little good. It is this rather simple fact that illustrates why patient access is so important. We all know that there is a bit of a provider shortage in the health care industry today and that this, combined with a greater number of insured patients looking for care, has providers' schedules jam-packed. This means that we must look for other ways to overcome these challenges in order to provide adequate access, allow for convenient scheduling for patients, and to improve communication with our patient population.

In this eBook, we'll explore the topics of **patient access, scheduling, and communication**, including the traditional challenges to each and how those issues can be mitigated. We will conclude by exploring how technology can aid in making sure that patients have access to care when they need it, that they are able to schedule in a way that is convenient for them, and that they feel their provider's practice communicates with them adequately. Let us get started.



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Patient Access

What is patient access?

The ability to which a patient can obtain care when it is needed, from whom it is needed, and where it is needed is known as patient access. With adequate patient access, patients are able to be seen by their preferred provider without a long wait and without the need to travel a long distance. In today's health care environment, this is particularly important because patients have begun to take a consumerist stance with regard to their health care, and they expect a higher standard with regard to access, coming as close to 24/7 availability as possible. When this expectation is not met, patient satisfaction goes down, which can have a negative effect on reimbursement.

What issues exist with regard to patient access?

Unfortunately, this 24/7 access that so many patients crave today is not often a possibility. There are a number of barriers that exist to providing access to the extent to which patients desire. The first barrier is that of limited, office hours and therefore, limited appointment availability. Many doctors offices are still operating on a Monday through Friday 8 a.m through 5 p.m. schedule; the same schedule that their patients are typically working. This causes a level of inconvenience associated with making a doctor's appointment as patients are required to request off work and lose valuable time and money in order to take care of their health. Practices would do well to offer office hours, at least one to two days a week, that allow patients to make appointments that will not disrupt their school or work schedules.

Another issue with patient access is the current shortage of clinicians, particularly in certain geographic areas. For patients living in rural areas, access to care is a common issue, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. This is particularly disconcerting, as it is estimated that as many as 57 million Americans are living in rural areas. These patients see a patient-to-primary care physician ratio of 39.8 physicians per 100,000 people. To break that down, that means that, on average, *each physician would have roughly 2,500 patients in their care.* Compare that to the ratio in urban areas, of 55.3 physicians per 100,000 patients or roughly 1,800 patients to a provider. It is easy to understand how getting a convenient appointment, or any



39.8 physicians per
1,000 people

appointment at all, would be difficult with the provider managing such a load of patients.

The next issue regarding patient access is that of transportation barriers. Even when a patient is able to get an appointment with their provider, there is one more step before they can receive the care they need: They need to be able to get to their appointment. When patients are unable to drive, cannot afford to have a car, or do not have convenient, reliable transportation, they often have no choice but to go without the care they need. In fact, it is estimated that roughly 3.5 million patients go without care because they do not have the necessary transportation to make it to their doctor's office. This is a terrible reality that must be remedied if we want our nation to be healthy.

The final issue with regard to patient access is that of limited education about the types of care sites that exist. Sometimes, getting patients the care they need is less about getting them to the office and more about making sure they get to the right office. There are certainly times where patients would be best served by seeing their primary care physician, but there are also times where they would be better served at an urgent care facility or even an emergency room. Providers must make sure that their patients understand the situations in which they should visit each of these care sites so that patients do not have difficulty accessing the necessary care because they are visiting the wrong location.

How do we solve these issues?

While these issues are certainly frustrating, none of them are irreparable. With some planning and intentionality, it's well within the scope of your practice's ability to put solutions in place that improve access to care for your patients. One of the first changes you can make in your practice to improve patient access is to expand your office hours to create greater availability of appointments. Adjusting office hours even just a couple of days each week can allow patients to schedule with their provider at a more convenient time. Another option is to utilize technology in order to allow patients to seek medical advice without having to come into the office. This isn't possible with every condition, but there are certainly times when in-person care isn't necessary and telemedicine can help fill the gap.

Another issue that technology can help solve is that of geographic barriers to care. *Telemedicine can improve not only convenience of appointments, but also allow patients to be seen by providers located a greater distance away without having to undertake the travel* that would normally be required. This allows patients to have access to the provider who is truly best to address their condition, rather than just the provider within that specialty who is located most conveniently.

In order to solve the transportation barrier to patient access you'll need to get creative. Partnering with a ride share company, such as Uber or Lyft, is one way to help patients with transportation difficulties to have access to the care they need. Both companies have recently announced plans to expand their service offerings into the healthcare space.

Additionally, some healthcare organizations have already taken the initiative to partner with a ride share service to ease the burden of transportation for their patients.

Finally, it's important to educate your patients on different illness and injury scenarios and the appropriate care sites for each. Make sure your patients understand what type of situations truly warrant a trip to the emergency room versus the situations that could be addressed at an urgent care center and those that really should be brought to their primary care provider. This can be done through direct conversations, certainly, but also through signage and educational material kept on hand in your office for patients to view and take with them. Providing this education not only ensures proper access for the patients you're educating, but also allows the proper care to be available for all patients when it's needed because there won't be misuse of care.

How does patient access relate to increasing overall patient satisfaction?

This likely sounds simplistic, but it's true - patients who can't get access to their provider when they need it are not going to be satisfied with that provider. If it's always a nightmare to schedule an appointment and when they finally get one the wait time is too long, this will understandably affect the patient's opinion of the provider in a negative way. Thankfully, the opposite is also true. When appointments are frequently able to be scheduled easily and at convenient times and patients are able to get in and out of the office without a long wait, patients are likely to be much more satisfied with that provider overall.



Frequently, unless the patient is calling with a sudden illness, the appointment will also be scheduled for weeks or possibly even months later, leaving the patient with a long wait to receive care.

Patient Scheduling

Traditional methods of patient scheduling

Anyone who has ever scheduled a doctor's appointment is likely familiar with the traditional method of scheduling. The patient calls into the medical practice during regular business hours and expresses that they need an appointment. The receptionist that they speak with will ask questions about why the patient needs to be seen and determine how urgent the scheduling need is. From there, that receptionist reviews the provider's schedule for openings and offers the first appointment that is appropriate for the patient's condition. Almost invariably that appointment will fall sometime during the typical business hours of Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m., meaning the patient will need to miss work. Frequently, unless the patient is calling with a sudden illness, the appointment will also be scheduled for weeks or possibly even months later, leaving the patient with a long wait to receive care. And, perhaps most frustrating, many practices will actually double book appointments in an effort to prevent having empty time slots due to subpar appointment confirmation processes. This is a great plan when one of the patients is a no-show; it's disastrous when everyone shows up and the provider is behind before the day even begins, leading to significant wait times and aggravated patients.





COST OF NO SHOWS

to our customers.

\$200

FOR EACH
UNUSED APPOINTMENT

\$1K

PER WEEK

\$4K

PER MONTH

\$50K

PER YEAR

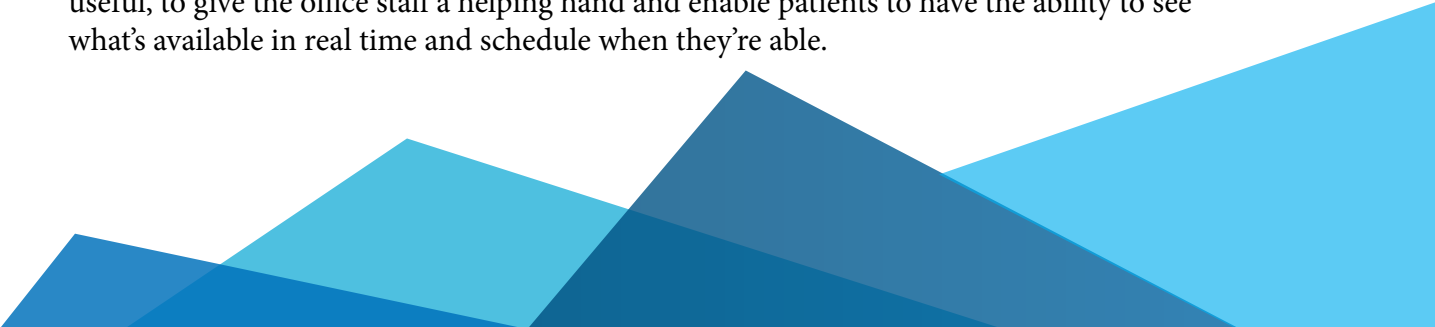
Difficulty of unfilled appointments

While waiting on an over-booked doctor is frustrating for the patient, it's easy to understand why this practice began. Unfilled appointments cause some significant difficulties for both practices and the patients they serve. First, unfilled appointments equal lost revenue for the practice. It's estimated that no-shows cost a practice an average of \$200 for each unused appointment. It only requires some simple math to realize that only one missed appointment per day adds up to \$1,000 in lost revenue per week. That's around \$4,000 lost each month and over \$50,000 lost in a year supposing only one appointment is missed per day. Unfortunately, it can often be many more than that so the financial risk of unfilled appointments is substantial.

Aside from the financial effects of unfilled appointments for the practice, there is the issue of missed opportunities for patients who need to be seen when appointments go unfilled. For each patient who forgot about their appointment or decided not to go for some reason there is likely someone who desperately needs to see the provider and would have loved to have the opportunity to fill that slot. Unfortunately, there's rarely a mechanism that allows these appointments that are empty without warning to be filled on short notice so they stay empty and patients remain unseen.

Lack of schedule transparency and unfilled appointments

Traditionally, appointment schedules are kept and maintained by the medical practice's front desk staff exclusively. These employees are expected to complete a large number of tasks each day, one of which is keeping each provider's schedule full. Too often the other tasks on their agenda prevent them from having the time to review the schedule for recently vacated time slots and calling patients who have been waiting for access to see if they can fill those spaces. If keeping these appointments filled wasn't dependent on busy office staff, it's certainly possible that there would be less lost revenue and more patients able to have the access that they desperately need. This is where technology is incredibly useful, to give the office staff a helping hand and enable patients to have the ability to see what's available in real time and schedule when they're able.





Patient Communication

How best to communicate with patients to prevent unfilled appointments

When they have options, they'll choose the appointment that works best for them and be less likely to have scheduling conflicts that could cause them to no-show.

One of the best ways to communicate with patients to keep appointments filled is by allowing your patients to schedule their appointments online. When patients can see the full schedule and a number of available options, they can choose the appointment that best fits their schedule, one that they'll be more likely to keep. When a patient is talking on the phone to a busy receptionist and an appointment is offered, they'll often take that appointment, even if they know it'll be difficult for them to make it, because they feel pressured to schedule and end the call quickly. When they have options, they'll choose the appointment that works best for them and be less likely to have scheduling conflicts that could cause them to no-show. As an added bonus, this not only makes scheduling more convenient for your patients, but also allows your staff to have valuable working time freed up to tackle other tasks.

Another important piece of keeping appointments filled is managing your wait list successfully. Even under the best of circumstances, patients will have conflicts that come up without warning and they will need to cancel an appointment at the last minute or fail to show up. This is where your wait list comes in handy. It can be difficult, in the midst of a busy day in the practice, to start calling through your wait list to try to fill an appointment that is as little as an hour away. Imagine if you didn't have to rely on your staff to do that. Imagine if it was done automatically for you. With technology, your wait list can essentially manage itself and your appointments will remain filled without you even having to give it a second thought.



Better respect your patients' time when scheduling issues arise

Too often, patients find themselves feeling as though their time isn't respected when they go to the doctor. Patients have arrived for an appointment to be told at the front desk that their doctor had to leave unexpectedly, sometimes without another option to be seen. Patients have received a call the day before an appointment that the provider won't be able to see them the next day without much reason as to why. Obviously there are situations in which this can't be prevented, but what can be controlled is how these interactions occur. When offering the solution of a new appointment, make sure to take the patient's schedule into consideration. Make sure they know that you see their time as valuable. Don't let them feel like a task being reprioritized. And, whenever possible, notify the patient as early before their appointment as possible when it needs to change.

Then there's the issue of a long wait. Unfortunately, doctors are kind of notorious for running behind and many patients dread their appointments because of this. Even without double booking, things do come up which cause the provider to get off schedule. But there's nothing more frustrating for a patient than leaving work for an appointment at 10:00 a.m. and still being in the waiting room at 10:30 or, even worse, 10:45. Show your patients that you value their time and realize that they're busy too by letting them know before they arrive if there's a long wait. A phone call, email, or text that notified patients of the delay in the schedule and allowed them to stay at work a little longer before heading in for their appointment will go a long way to make their day better. Even better if it's automated so your staff doesn't have to disrupt their already busy schedule.





Conclusion

Patient access, scheduling, and communication all go hand in hand and play a big role in your patient's level of satisfaction with your practice. It's important to make sure that your patients are able to have access to the care they need when they need it, that scheduling is convenient and efficient, and that there is clear communication between your patients and the practice, particularly when there are scheduling issues and delays.

All of this can be simplified with the use of technology and Henry Schein SolutionsHub is here to help by offering everseat. Everseat is a cloud-based software platform that drives schedule density by enhancing referral management, digitally managing your waitlist, and allowing for online booking. With everseat, your schedule availability is transparent for your patients to see. Patients who are waiting for an appointment are digitally notified when one becomes available. When openings are clearly going to be unfilled, everseat pulls patients forward into that opening, avoiding a revenue gap and making for satisfied patients when their wait is reduced. Are you ready to learn more about how everseat can increase patient satisfaction in your practice? Visit henryscheinsolutionshub.com or call 833-433-2482 for more information.



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