

Improving the Patient Experience

By Dawn Hulthen Koncsol

Audiology, as a profession, is ever changing, growing, and evolving. Once again, with the upcoming over-the-counter hearing aid definition and Merit-Based Incentive Payment System, we all are trying to look in our crystal balls to see what the future holds. Audiologists have been the patient's best option for the best patient care. We are, after all, part of the health-care industry.

We must focus now on how to provide the best patient experience, the most patient-centered care to ensure success.

We must make sure we have equipped ourselves with all of the tools, data, and information that we have available. We must look at how to make our clinics run the most efficiently. We must use all the resources under our control to keep our profession relevant and our practices successful.

Success can be difficult when trying to deliver top-notch audiology services with the highest standard of clinical care, awhile at the same time providing financially stable solutions

for a practice to remain strong and present for years to come. The ultimate question is: "How do we provide that exceptional patient experience and keep the doors open?" Even seasoned audiologists will admit that practice management is a challenging topic. Working analytics and applying real-world numbers to optimize clinical patient care can feel like you've entered another profession entirely.

Time, equipment, resources, and staffing will be the major issues we contend with as we try to achieve a successful balance. We ask questions, such as: What is enough time for a diagnostic assessment or a hearing aid evaluation and fitting? How can we see a substantial number of patients and give the time for counseling and services we feel is appropriate? How do we have the most recent equipment with all the features when reimbursement for testing can be so very poor? How do we have enough staffing to manage patient care? Who are the most appropriate staff members for audiology services? Lastly, how do we have the best products at the most

reasonable cost to provide multiple solutions to patients? We review these very real questions daily in our practice as we look into the crystal ball for the future.

Setting Up the Appropriate Time for Patient Care

Consider and review what is the necessary time for services. Each audiologist, depending on specialty, experience, and training, might give varied answers. In general, 30 minutes for a hearing evaluation and 60 minutes for hearing aid evaluation and/or fitting are the average in the busiest clinics. This does not assume pediatrics or specialty appointments.

From this average, each clinic may modify, based on patient need and setting. Medical facilities might need more hearing evaluations and may set 20 minutes. Private practice and audiologists' offices may use 60-minute slots for a hearing evaluation. Our volume of patients needing to be seen will drive what our time and schedules should look like. Every facility and audiologist should have good

reporting software available to them for analytics of metrics.

Objective data helps to shape our practice going forward. Trending CPT codes, insurance payers, patient age ranges, provider charges, and payments are essential basics to know about your day-to-day in clinic. If you do not have this type of resource available, I encourage you to work with your management team to look at options within your practice to obtain data. This data will become crucial to help determine equipment and staffing needs, as you will know your financial productivity status. By knowing those numbers, you can create your justification for staff and equipment.

Part of staffing consideration is the growth and potential of telehealth and remote assistant hearing aid programming. These avenues may be potential efficiencies for your clinic to reduce appointment-slot use and manage patient needs remotely. In addition, they provide a convenience for patients who may have limitations to getting to clinic due to schedule or transportation issues. Each state licensure should be evaluated for this possibility, as well as for any restrictions from insurance payers. Thoroughly vet the potential with the cost of equipment, ability within your company's software, and IT needs.

Addressing the Staffing Needs of a Clinic

Some good current debates include what the staffing mix should look like for audiology. Information exists on supplementing staffing with hearing-instrument specialists, audiology technicians, and fourth-year doctorate externs. It is important to look at the need on a clinic-by-clinic basis in terms of what you expect or anticipate this staff member to do. Insurance, licensure, and scope of practice can limit each type of hire's

work. In addition, consider how staff members are compensated.

Setting up teams that will be successful and happy to work as a group can often come down to who is incentivized and who are partners in the clinic. Having a good team that works well together and is financially successful will justify the hiring of enough staff to provide an experience that allows patients to walk away feeling great.

When it comes to improving a patient's experience with us, it can be as simple as reducing wait times, same-day appointment availability, and simple walk-in hearing aid clean and checks. All of these items are achievable if you have the right staff working to the full extent of their training and their roles, giving patients adequate time to feel their needs are fully met in a thoughtful and responsible way.

Assessing Available Resources

There is a great opportunity to enrich each step of the patient intake, evaluation, and follow-up. The world is changing and so is how we best provide information.

A good revamp of your website may be in order. Consider if your handouts and pamphlets are effective, or too much. Maybe it is time to condense to a simple handout and an online link to more interactive information. There should be good information present to a patient at check-in, at the end of testing, and at the end of any hearing aid discussion.

Consider formal packets that you can customize. Hearing aid vendors often are willing to help provide additional marketing and patient support literature that can be customizable for your practice. Patients can be overwhelmed just learning they need our help. We need to provide them with different avenues for getting

that information reinforced and supported.

Conclusion

As Walt Disney once said, "You can design and create and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality." The core of what helps patients be successful is you, the audiologist! We bring a service that is unmatched in ability, training, and care. Competing in a competitive environment with big-box, online, and commercial offices means we are responsible to make each patient experience a showcase of our talents to provide the best care and experience.

It is our responsibility to stay current in the trends, tools, and skills needed to diagnose and counsel a patient through their specific needs. We must stay experts in the technology and resources available to improve patient performance and be lifelong learners. Believing we are the experts means charging for our skills; lobbying with insurance companies and governmental bodies; and being active in our audiology organizations to push our profession to the forefront of managing audiology services for patient care.

We all must take this responsibility. It is our privilege and passion. Create the journey for your patient that you will be proud of for years to come, and teach it to the next generation. 🎧

Dawn Hulthen Koncsol, AuD, is the director of ENT ancillary services at Charlotte Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Clinic in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is a member of the Academy's Business Enhancements, Strategies, and Technologies (BEST) Committee.