



*Dynamic Chiropractic* – November 17, 2003, Vol. 21, Issue 24

## **Do You Really Want New Patients?**

By Lisa Bilodeau, CA

*Dynamic Chiropractic* welcomes Lisa Bilodeau as a new columnist, one of three now writing articles directed toward chiropractic assistants. With a wealth of knowledge on enhancing chiropractic practices, she is always busy as an advisor to DCs and their staffs.

Do you really want new patients? If your answer is "Yes," let's find out how prepared you are. Answer the following questions:

1. When and where do you expect to find new patients?
2. What is chiropractic, and what makes your office unique?
3. Are the words and phrases you use getting you the results you want?
4. How prepared are you to answer potential patients' questions?
5. Do you set aside specific times each day in your appointment book for new patients?

**New patients can be found just about everywhere you go:** at the grocery checkout counter; your child's school; or sitting next to you on a plane. The server at your favorite restaurant; the claims adjuster you're speaking with about a bill past due, and, believe it or not, solicitors - yes, solicitors, some of our biggest distractions - are all potential patients. Whether they show up in person at our front desk selling flowers, or call to see if we're happy with our long-distance telephone carrier, all of these people are prospective chiropractic patients. Always remember to treat them politely and courteously, just as you would like to be treated. Like many people, prospective new patients may not even know what a chiropractor is or does. A few minutes of your caring concern, taking the time to explain to them what chiropractic is, can make their day, and hopefully educate them about how our profession might be able to assist them.

I'll never forget the claims adjuster who was laughing with her co-worker while I was on the telephone with her about a past-due bill. She explained that they were laughing about the problems she was having with her wrist. I asked if she had seen a chiropractor for her condition; she said that she had not, because "all they treat are backs." I took the time to explain to her that we handle many conditions, including extremity problems, and asked if she would like the names of some chiropractors in the area in which she worked.

### **What Is Chiropractic?**

Find out everything you can about your office and the services you provide. Twenty-three years ago, when I was looking for work in Petaluma, Calif., I interviewed for a receptionist position in a chiropractic office. I did not know what a chiropractor was, nor could I spell or even pronounce the word correctly. The consultation room in which I was being interviewed had a small model illustrating several vertebrae and nerves. Dr. Alwyn Sykes explained to me what chiropractic was. He explained that it was a natural form of health care that used the inherent properties of the body to heal the body.

He used the model to show me what subluxations were and how they affect a person's health, and he explained that the same power that made the body could heal the body, and that it could be done, in many cases, without drugs or surgery. I got goose bumps. Considering that my father was an MD and my mother had been a social worker for 30 years in a large Bay Area hospital, all I knew about was drugs and surgery. This was a major life-changing event for me. After I was hired, I also learned that I was not a receptionist, but a professional chiropractic assistant, a title I still wear with pride after 23 years.

Dr. James Parker stated that there were more than 700 methods of correcting vertebral subluxations. Find out what methods your doctor uses. If your doctor offers other services, such as rehabilitative therapies or nutritional counseling, find out all you can about those services.

**Become a patient in your own office.** If you haven't already done so, become a chiropractic patient. Come through the front door as any new patient would: Fill out the required forms, and get a complete chiropractic, orthopedic, and neurological examination. If your doctor takes X-rays, have them taken and have the doctor give you a thorough report of your examination and X-ray findings. Have your doctor determine an appropriate program of care for you; follow it, and don't forget to attend the health care presentation all new patients are required to attend.

By becoming a patient in your own office, you'll have a much better understanding about what your doctor does with patients (and why) and you will have the great fortune of enjoying better health through chiropractic. In addition, you will have the priceless gift of empathy for patients who may come in for conditions similar to those you have experienced, and who have found relief through chiropractic care.

**Use proper telephone etiquette.** I can hear you saying, "I know how to answer the phone; I do it all the time at home." But the reality is, when we're at work, we need to answer the phone in a more professional manner. Since the majority of times the initial contact you have with patients is by telephone, you must remember several important things:

- Always give 100 percent of your attention to the person calling. Don't carry on two conversations at once.
- When answering, always state your name. This creates value for patients. When they enter the office for that first visit, they will be looking for you. You are that caring, attentive person they spoke with, and they know you will take care of them in the office, just as you did on the telephone.
- When giving your name, always state it in an "up" tone, and remember to smile! The tone conveys your enthusiasm and says you are there to be of service to them.
- Sometimes, the office is very busy and you're checking patients in or out, collecting money, and making patients' next appointments simultaneously. If this is the case, and you are the only person available to answer the call, it is important that you paint a picture for the caller. The caller cannot see what's taking place in your office, while the patients in the office can.

For example: "I have four patients standing in front of me. Would it be OK if I call you back in 10 minutes?" Most callers will not refuse. They would rather have you call them back than place them on hold for a prolonged period of time. If it is necessary and they agree that you can call them back, remember to get back to them when you promised you would. The caller will be waiting, and if you don't keep your agreement you lose credibility. Painting a picture is also important when you're placing someone on hold for any reason. Explain what you are going to do, and briefly explain why. For example, "I'm going to place you on hold so I can go to the front desk to schedule your appointment."

- Never keep anyone on hold for more than 30 seconds. In some cases, it may just be a patient calling to say he or she is running a few minutes late, and that person will show up at your office with a cell

phone to the ear, waiting for you to come back on the line.

**Be prepared for: "What technique does your doctor use?" "How much will it cost?" or "Will it hurt?"** These are just a few of the questions a prospective new patient may ask. Before I was allowed to answer the telephone in my first office, the office manager provided me with a list of words to use, and scripts to answer potential questions that callers and patients might ask. It seemed to me that this was a waste of time; I knew how to answer a telephone. However, what I found out was that in our profession, we also believe in the power of words, and it is not just what we say, but how we say it that can make or break a practice.

Many callers have questions they need to have answered before they can determine if your office is the right place for them.

- Listen to their questions and do your best to answer them.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, know where to find the answer and get back to them.
- In some cases, you will have had to ask the doctor to call them back with the answer. "Wow," they may say, since this shows them that we are a profession that truly cares about our patients, and a personal call from the doctor can really do the trick. Go the extra mile.
- Know and use your scripts! Practice management consultant Sherry Hodge has written a book titled *Scripts For Success*. In her introduction, she states: "Scripts are not meant to manipulate, but to make situations more comfortable and patients more comfortable...The intention of scripts is to give CAs a foundation from which they can feel confident." She goes on to say, "Scripts are what make us more effective and successful as CAs. Scripts make it more fun!" I could not agree more.

## **The Appointment Book**

Perhaps you've heard the saying that nature will always fill a void; therefore, you must have a specific time set aside for new patients. These times must be scheduled when the doctor will not be with regular, established patients. All patients must have quality, uninterrupted time with the doctor. If it's your intention to keep your new patients, this is a must! In a future article, I'll cover appointment book guidelines for maximum efficiency, but until then, be sure to do the following:

1. Have patients spell their first and last names for you.
2. Be sure to get home and work telephone numbers. Confirm these numbers by repeating them back to patients, including the area code.
3. Ask who referred them to your office.
4. Ask if the patient's condition is due to a work-related injury or another kind of injury. Do not ask if it is a workers' compensation or personal injury situation, as many people do not understand these terms. This will help you to determine what type of financial case you're dealing with. Determining this prior to the patient's arrival will ensure that you have the correct (and in many cases, required) paperwork ready for the initial visit.
5. Give directions to the office. Tell - rather than ask - if they know how to get there, because in many cases, they may think they know, but end up being late because they didn't really know how to get there. In Santa Cruz County, where I live, there is a Soquel Drive and a Soquel Avenue. One becomes the other, and the two streets run the entire length of the county; people are always calling from the "wrong" end saying they're lost. This can throw your entire schedule into chaos!

So, how did you do? Ideally, I have given you some answers to questions and situations you may have experienced in the past.

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*Scotts Valley, California*

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