

Medical Assistants can help ease patient anxiety

by (ARA)

Patient anxiety. There are books devoted to it. Web sites. There's even "White Coat Syndrome," which causes a patient to have high blood pressure and other symptoms only in the doctor's office. The fact is when it comes to visiting the doctor, anxiety-induced symptoms can range from mild fear to a full-blown clinical phobia. Is it the medicinal smell? The stark white walls? The long wait? A bad previous experience? Perhaps it's the fear of finding out something you really don't want to know. For some people, it's all of these things. Medical assisting is a booming field, projected to grow by 27 percent or more through 2014.

Humor is an important tool medical assistants use to help anxious patients. But there are staff members in every doctor's office trained to help patients feel more comfortable -- staff members like the medical assistant. The medical assistant is not only trained to handle both administrative and clinical duties, but is also someone who can make or break a patient's office experience. Humor is an important tool medical assistants use to help anxious patients. A patient with breast cancer, for instance, felt that her interactions and running jokes with the doctor's office staff made her experience much more pleasant, according to Donna Patterson, former certified medical assistant. Patterson, now the curriculum manager for the medical assisting program at Corinthian Colleges, which owns and operates Bryman Colleges, Georgia Medical Institute and Florida Metropolitan University, added, "We never treated people like sick patients, but rather like human beings. That's what kept people going. Compassion and empathy, along with a well-placed joke or humorous comment, lets patients know you're not walking on eggshells just because they're sick, but are merely treating them like any other patient," said Patterson. Ellen McKinley, CMA, an instructor at Georgia Medical Institute in Norcross, Ga., agrees. "A medical assistant uses good eye contact and body language to show the patient he's important and taken seriously." Medical assisting is a booming field, projected to grow by 27 percent or more through 2014, according to U.S. Department of Labor -- growth that is largely due to the increase in the number of group practices, clinics and other health care facilities that need a high proportion of support personnel. Because the medical assistant is often the first person a patient meets in a medical office, the way the medical assistant speaks, smiles or expresses himself affects the patient, according to Chris Spray, medical assisting instructor at Bryman College's Reseda, Calif., campus. "A medical assistant can recognize patient anxiety just by observing body language," she says. In some situations patients actually feel more comfortable talking to a medical assistant or RN than the doctor. Today, as doctors' patient loads become heavier, that sense of comfort with the medical assistant or RN becomes even more important. "The patient load for the average doctor has increased tremendously over the last 20 years, making it physically impossible for the doctor to spend time reassuring anxious patients," says Fred Valdes, MD, medical program director for Florida Metropolitan University in Pompano Beach, Florida. "In today's typical medical practice, the role of 'comforter' has been assumed by the medical assistant, who can establish a personal touch which is so much a part of the healing process." Medical assistants also help minimize frustration and anxiety by processing such paperwork as insurance forms and test results," says Debra Lynn Penman, Doctor of Chiropractic a program chairperson at Bryman College's City of Industry, Calif., campus. Doctors' offices are working on other ways to make visits more pleasant, as well. Penman, who previously ran a chiropractic office, notes that white walls are the worst thing for anxious patients. "The office needs to be warm and inviting with walls painted in colors like peach, soft yellow or light tan with contrasting-colored furniture." Penman adds that keeping kids busy is important too, especially when mom and dad are talking to the office staff. "At my office, we even had several hand-held video games for adults and older children. Remember the longer that a person has to stare at the same four walls, the more anxious they are going to get." From a little nervousness to increased blood pressure, nearly everyone visiting the doctor experiences some anxiety. A medical assistant can help to allay that anxiety through calming words and actions and patients should seek out these individuals on every trip to the doctor's office. Bryman Colleges (www.bryman-college.com) and Georgia Medical Institute (www.georgia-med.com) offer healthcare diploma programs in medical assisting, dental assisting, massage therapy, medical administrative assistant, medical insurance billing and coding, surgical technology and pharmacy technician. Bryman and Georgia Medical are

part of Corinthian Colleges, Inc., one of the largest providers of post-secondary education and training in North America.

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