The Predatory Patient … When a Patient Becomes Your Worst Nightmare

The predatory patient is every Doctor of Chiropractic’s worst nightmare. They often appear one way – charming and cooperative – while they are really quite scheming.

Predatory patients are patients with a hidden agenda. They may be looking for someone to sue, attempting to secure a doctor’s excuse to miss work, attempting to con an insurance company – or have any number of ulterior motives. What happens is that doctors can unknowingly become party to a predatory patient’s plans, which can put a doctor’s reputation and practice at risk.

Doctors often don’t recognize the manipulative behavior for a number of reasons. One reason is that predatory patients can be experts at appealing to a doctor’s ego. For example, they may say something like: “The last two doctors I saw were idiots, but I’ve heard wonderful things about you.”

Almost everyone wants to be liked and respected, so it can become easy for doctors to fall prey to compliments while losing objectivity about the patient’s possible motives. Keep in mind that when patients criticize doctors, they don’t always have valid reasons to do so. In these situations, it can be a good idea to ask past doctors why a patient was discharged. (A release from the patient will be needed to contact the doctor.)

Another reason doctors don’t recognize predatory patients is that D.C.s often don’t see how patients act outside the treatment room. That’s where your staff can be a great resource to you. They can observe how patients behave while in the waiting room with patients, checking in with the front desk, and in receiving instructions before clinical treatments. By listening to your staff, you’ll be able to hear additional perspectives about your patients.

For example, be wary when your staff tells you about patients who:

- Attempt to schedule appointments for the last spot of the day or want to see you only after hours.
- Behave rudely with them, while appearing quite personable and friendly with you.
- Disregard staff instructions. For instance, the patient may appear naked in the treatment room in spite of being told not to remove any undergarments and to don a gown.
- Make negative comments as they leave the practice such as, "Well, I didn't get any help at this place."

Needless to say, your staff needs to be confident that you will be supportive of them in communicating that "Joe left kind of angry today," "Susan ignored my gowning instructions" or other suspect behavior.

Some doctors take additional steps to protect their practices by arranging for staff to alert them to potential problems – without letting the patient know. One office developed the fictional code name of “Dr. Black” for situations where
the doctor wanted a staff member present during the treatment phase. The doctor would tell a staff member, "Dr. Black needs copies of the records" to communicate the need to be present in the treatment of a high-risk patient.

Managing the situation

Once you have identified a predatory patient, you need to protect your practice. As a first line of defense, you are encouraged to call NCMIC’s Free Claims Advice Hotline at 1-800-242-4052. As a policyholder, you can call us to confidentially discuss concerns you’re unsure how to handle. Your call will not open a claim file, unless a request for damages has already been put in writing.

In addition, here are some tips to manage a situation with a potentially predatory patient:

Empower your staff. Your staff can help handle difficult situations by:

- Being alert to questions of a personal nature that could be tip-offs of a predatory patient. (Where does the doctor live? Is the doctor happily married?)
- Being permitted to handle scheduling without your involvement.
- Planning the schedule so that they can be in the room during treatment, if needed.
- Notifying you immediately whenever they observe a patient they have concerns about.

Include a chaperone in the treatment room. The presence of a third party in the room will usually stop inappropriate behavior. If a patient refuses to receive treatment while a chaperone is in the treatment room, it’s a huge warning sign that you may be dealing with a predatory or another type of risky patient.

Be clear and direct with patients about behavior you find inappropriate. Many predatory patients are like bullies and will comply once confronted. If they don’t, it may be time to end the doctor/patient relationship.

Document as precisely as possible all office visits and events. In addition, keep all letters, phone messages, etc. Record-keeping is always important, but this is especially true with a predatory patient. At same time, make sure your records reflect any concerns about the patient in a professional manner.

Sometimes ending the doctor-patient relationship is the best option. If this step becomes necessary, make sure to communicate professionally and document the discussion in the records. (For guidance, see "Should I End the Doctor-Patient Relationship?" which appeared in the Winter ’04/’05 issue of Examiner and is available on the policyholder section of www.ncmic.com.)

By effectively dealing with patients who have a hidden agenda, you’ll be able to spend more time on patients who want quality chiropractic care. And that’s bound to make your professional life more enjoyable and your practice more successful!

Some patients seem pleasant until their true intentions are revealed

For more tips on dealing with high-risk patients, go to www.ncmic.com/3536 and read NCMIC’s professional boundaries guide.