Dear Midcoast Colleagues:

We are all aware patients have become more litigious over the past decade. Most malpractice carriers report a high percentage of lawsuits start with angry patients. I would like to take a few minutes of your time to provide information on dealing with angry patients.

Before we discuss angry patients I would like you consider your patients as your customers. As a customer what would you feel if you showed up for your dinner reservation only to be told it would be an additional 45 minute wait with no explanation offered. Would you wait in line at Nordstrom’s for 30 minutes when the salesman told you it would take 5 minutes to get you on your way?

Your patients are your customers. Patients are walking billboards. They can be advocates for your work, or testimonials to your shortcomings. There are many reasons patients get angry. At times anger develops before the patient even sees the physician. Perhaps the office is running late, and the patient perception is that “the doctor does not respect my time”. Perhaps the patient feels powerless due to illness and he/she has unrealistic expectations.

Next I would like to review the criteria and steps for discharging patients. Each of our health plans has a formal process for the removal of members. Should you have questions on any of the health plan policies for discharging patients, please go to their web-site directly. The criteria for discharging a patient are:

- Three or more missed appointments within 6 consecutive months.
- Failure to pay required co-pays.
- Refusal to follow physician’s recommended treatment or procedures which result in deterioration of the patient’s medical condition.
- Disruptive behavior, unruly behavior, abusive and/or profane language, verbal threat of bodily harm, unacceptable behavior relative to drug and/or alcohol misuse, and/or chronic demands for unreasonable services (e.g. drug seeking).
Prior to discharging a patient we encourage physicians to counsel the member on inappropriate behavior. Counseling may be face to face or by certified letter. Counseling should express what behavior is unacceptable and what options the patient has to retain their relationship with your practice. No less important, please be sure to document counseling in the patient record. Attached is an excellent patient letter!

Remember patient satisfaction impacts your practice and our company. We encourage our physicians to establish office values and strive to provide excellent customer services. It’s often helpful to acknowledge the patient’s feelings. If there is a particular problem or misunderstanding, respond as early as possible by providing information or advice that could clear things up.

We recognize that no matter how hard you try, you can’t please everybody. We also recognize active listening and dealing with unhappy patients can be a tough challenge, but please remember that patient satisfaction and grievances are included in each health plan quality scorecard and may directly impact bonuses going forward.

Sincerely,

Brian Desmond, M.D.