## Scripts for Difficult Situations

### Situation: Patient is demanding after being a no-show, late, or dropping in without an appointment

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| **SITUATION** | **SCRIPT** |
| No-show and then they demand an appointment | * **Heart:** “I know when unexpected things come up, it can be easy to miss an appointment. And I realize that you still need to be seen.” * **Head:** “Dr. Peters’ next available appointment is on Thursday at 6 p.m. I’ll be happy to reschedule you then. In the future, please call us as soon as you know you’re missing an appointment, so we can make adjustments and arrange to fit you in at the earliest possible time. (Explain your practice’s cancellation policy in a way that shows how it is in the interest of patients.) * **Heart**: “Thank you for your understanding, (customer’s name), and we look forward to seeing you then.” |
| Parent and child come over an hour late. Provider says they can no longer fit them in. Front desk tells parent and parent demands to see the doctor. | * **Heart**: (Give them the benefit of the doubt!) “I realize how difficult it can be sometimes to make it to an appointment on time, and I’m sure you have a very compelling reason for being late… * Find out why the child is here if you don’t know, and determine if it is a child who must for safety’s sake be seen.… * **If it’s a well visit or non-urgent:** “I’m sorry to say that we’re packed today and all of our providers are serving other patients right now.” Here’s what I can do for you. The earliest appointment I have available is tomorrow at \_\_\_\_\_. I realize you’re here now and coming again tomorrow might be inconvenient. But, our doctors and nurses have no time available the rest of today. So, how about if I book you for tomorrow at \_\_?” * **Say what you CAN do for them**… “I really want (child’s name) to get the care they need, so this is what I suggest…” Offer whatever options you can, e.g. Set up an appointment for the following day, but suggest they email the doctor with questions that need answering today, or offer to personally take a question to the doctor and get back to them within a certain amount of time etc…or whatever you CAN offer them) * **Heart:** “I’m sorry for the stress you must be feeling from all this. I really want (child’s name) to receive the care s/he needs and I appreciate your understanding.” |
| Patient demands to be seen IMMEDIATELY TODAY for non-sick (but from their point of view URGENT) visit  Patient is angry and presses. | * **Accommodate them if you possibly can.** “I want to help you and will see what I can do to fit you in. I’m asking that in the future, you make an appointment. Our doctors and nurses are very busy. I can’t promise to be able to do this next time and I wouldn’t want you to be inconvenienced by coming at the last minute and not being able to get what you came for.” * **If you can’t accommodate:**   + **Heart**: “You must be feeling quite pressured about this…”   + **Head**: “The fact is, our providers are completely booked with people with appointments. Since this isn’t a health emergency, I’m sorry to say we won’t be able to accommodate you today.”   + **Say what you CAN do for them**: “Our earliest appointment will be Friday at noon. Shall I go ahead and set it up for you?”   + **Heart**: “(Customer’s name), I really wish we could accommodate you today and I appreciate you for you understanding.” * “I realize this is a great inconvenience to you, and I’m very sorry we can’t fit you in today.” |

### Situation: Patient has more needs than doctor has time to address.

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| **SITUATION** | **SCRIPT** |
| Parent has appointment for Jimmy and brings Susie and Lizzie too. Parent asks doctor to examine them too. The parent’s request would be time-consuming and the doctor doesn’t have time to do this without keeping everyone else waiting. | **Is there an option?** “I want Lizzie and Susie to get the attention they need. I didn’t expect to see them right now. But I think we can fit them in. Will you please go back to the desk and register them, and we’ll fit them in as soon as possible. It could take up to \_\_ minutes/hours. Or would you prefer to make an appointment for another day?”   * **Heart:** “I want Susie and Lizzie to get the care they need…” * **Head:** “Right now we have a room full of patients with appointments who are waiting to be seen. Since I didn’t expect to see Susie and Lizzie today, I’m asking you to make another appointment for them. I’m afraid it wouldn’t be fair to keep everyone else waiting.” * **A good reason in the interest of the patient** “Since I want to give Susie and Lizzie my full attention, I’m asking you to make them each an appointment in advance.” * **Heart:** “I appreciate your understanding, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” |
| Patient wants to discuss many issues. Doctor hasn’t planned to give this much time to this one appointment. Many people waiting. | * **Heart:** “Ms. Landau, I understand that you have other important questions you’d like to discuss. I’m sorry to say that there isn’t time for me to address them all right now, since I would be keeping other people with appointments waiting.” * **Head:** “Since I really want to give your questions the attention they deserve, I can offer a couple of options. I can arrange for you to talk with our Nurse Practitioner, Susan Haley, either in person or by phone. Susan is terrific and I know that talking with her could be very helpful. Or, you could make another appointment so you and I can talk further.” * **Heart:** Thank you for your understanding, Ms. Landau.”   If she persists: “Mrs. Landau, I do want your other concerns to get the attention they deserve. Right now, we need to end, since I am keeping my next patient waiting. How about if I have Susan Haley call you later today?” |

### Situation: Patient pushes doctor/staff to do something inappropriate or illegal

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| **SITUATION** | **SCRIPT** |
| Patient wants a remedy or test that doctor doesn’t think is appropriate.  Example: “You say I don’t need an antibiotic, I want one!” | **Heart:** “I can see how concerned you are for your health. I also want you to feel better fast and want to do anything that I can to help.”  **Head:** “I believe this is a viral infection, which means it would not be responsive to antibiotics. I’ve seen a lot of patients the last couple of days with similar symptoms, and every one of them is getting better without antibiotics.”  “Please feel free to call or email me (here’s how I can be reached) if your symptoms worsen, or if you are not doing better within \_\_ days.”  **Heart:** “Thanks for understanding. I want what’s best for you, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” |
| Patient presses for psychiatric drugs when he/she can’t reach psychiatrist | **Heart:** “I know how stressful this is, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I want to help.”  **Head:** The fact is, I don’t have the facts or background I would need to safely prescribe that medication for you. I suggest calling the psychiatrists number and, if your doctor isn’t available, speaking with the person on call for your doctor.”  **Heart:** Thank you for understanding, Ms. \_\_\_ I want to do what’s right for you.” |
| Patient asks nurse/doctor to prescribe over the phone | **Heart**: “I realize you feel sure of what’s wrong with your daughter and that it would be inconvenient (uncomfortable) for you to bring her in.  **Head:** “Still, for her safety and to consider all appropriate options, I need to see her before I prescribe medication for her.”  **Heart:** “Thanks for understanding.” |
| Parent calls to say child’s camp physical is due tomorrow. She wants to FAX it to the office staff and have it filled in (without child being examined, since there is no time left.) | **Heart:** “I realize you’re under a lot of pressure now, because the deadline is tomorrow. I’m very sorry that we won’t be able to complete the form without actually seeing Jimmy. “  **Head:** “The camp requires that the information we enter must relate to a physical Jimmy had within the last two years. Jimmy didn’t have a physical here within the last two years. We’ll need to do a physical in order to complete this form---for Jimmy’s safety and so we can be sure we are accurate about his health. Dr. Frank is not available to see Jimmy this afternoon. How about bringing Jimmy in to see our Nurse Practitioner Myrna Paris at 3pm?”  (If she says they can’t come and she wants the form completed without an exam.) “I realize you are very busy and didn’t plan to bring Jimmy in. I’m sorry to say we can’t complete the form without seeing him. It is for his own protection and it’s also illegal to do it.”  **Heart**: I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, Ms. \_\_\_\_ and thank you for understanding.” |
| Patient asks physician to change a date on a form (e.g. vaccination date) or make up any vaccination date if there is no record of one. | **Heart:** “I know getting kids ready for sports/camp can really feel like an added pressure and that you would like to turn in everything required and have no hassles from the camp.”  **Head:** “The fact is, for your son, we have no record of this shot. What I can do is write “No record available; mother says he had this.” I need to be accurate for your son’s safety. It would also be illegal for me to guess or falsify here. ”  **Heart:** “Thank you for understanding, Ms. \_\_\_\_.” |
| Patient wants you to change the procedure code so that insurance will cover a visit for a physical that’s too soon to be reimbursable. | **Heart:** “I realize this insurance situation is very frustrating for you.”  **Head:** “I’m sorry to say cannot alter the date to solve that problem. Our practice rules don’t allow this. It’s also illegal. And I’m responsible for accurate health records for you.”  **Heart:** “I’m very sorry I don’t have a convenient solution.” |

### Situation: Patient upset with policy; claims no knowledge

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| Patient claims that they never were told a particular policy | **Heart:** “I’m so sorry this has taken you by surprise.”  **Head:** “When you registered with us, we gave you a packet that detailed all of our policies. I know it can be a lot to remember and keep track of, so let me take a few minutes to go over it with you now.”  **Heart:** “Thanks for understanding, (customer’s name). And thank you for trusting us to care for you.” |

### Situation: Uncooperative physician creating problems for others

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| Some physicians always take too long and keep people waiting. | **Heart:** “I know how much you care for your patients and you are generous to want to spend extra time with them.”  **Head:** “It’s a dilemma, because there are \_\_ people waiting right now, all of whom scheduled time out of their busy lives to come in. And they are becoming agitated from the extra wait. They deserve to be seen close to the time of their appointment.”  **Heart:** “I know it’s not easy to speed up, and if there is anything I can do to help, please let me know. I need to ask you to move more quickly, for the sake of all of our patients. Thanks for understanding.”  **Suggestions**   * Accept reality and schedule longer appointments for that doctor. * Raise physician consciousness: Send form with patients to track time at each step (monitor waits at each step and total process time)—puts good pressure on doctor   + Put beginning and end times on encounter form   + If pattern continues, lengthen appointments (and pay doctor less) |

Source: *Physician Entrepreneurs:* *The Quality Patient Experience* by Wendy Leebov, 2008 **©**.