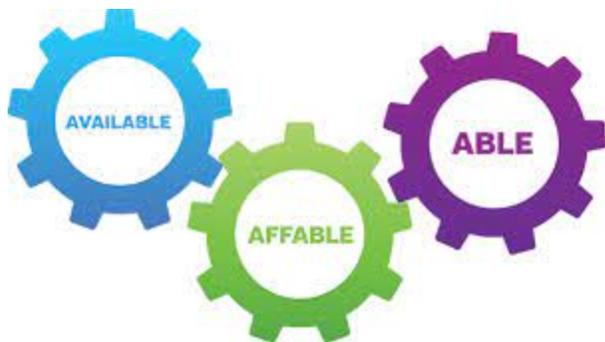


Reality Stories Of Medicine

Short Vignettes About Office and Hospital Practice; Principles You Won't Learn in School

AUGUST 6, 2022 by DR. ROBERT

The three As; availability, affability, and ability are still true today



The three A's of **availability, affability, and ability** were passed down to me in my medical training as the keys to success as a physician. This may be true in any service profession, but in the day-to-day practice of medicine, the order of importance is availability first, then affability, and finally ability. What was true thirty-five years ago is still true today.

A good medical provider who is “hard to get a hold of” digs his/her own grave. (they are not good, by definition) Patients don't like it, families don't like it, and other healthcare providers don't like it. The principle of availability is one of the reasons that I have phones in my exam rooms (not for patient access). Many physicians do not like this practice, but I find that being available for physician-to-physician consultations instantaneously by phone is helpful for service. Most calls don't take more than a minute, and the patients don't seem to mind, at least they haven't complained yet that I may have to take a call while seeing them. We pride our out-patient office on getting all patients in promptly when they call with a problem. If we have important laboratories or x-rays to order, we demand that they be done swiftly to enhance service. If you aren't available, how can you be excellent at service? Availability is the first pillar of success for medical practice, without a doubt.

Years ago, one of our healthcare system's forty year-old surgical subspecialists took one week of a vacation every month. He felt that he needed to take a lot of vacation time to deal with the stresses of being a doctor and to get to his vacation home. Talk about interruptive for patient care. Also, it was hard on scheduling patients, and because of being frequently “out”, he burned his own bridge for referrals from other practitioners. Good to take a vacation for the doc, but bad for his staff and his patients, and those covering.

Over the years, I have received literally hundreds of consultations from other doctors by simply “running into them” at the hospital while doing rounds. Being visible to others, and approachable will no doubt help you in your success as a provider.

Conversely, comments from patients like “I can never get a hold of you....or I can never get into see you.....” are not positive comments and need to be dealt with promptly by the office staff. The staff must be trained in phone triaging and not be a barrier to patient-physician interaction. The staff cannot be too “overly protective” of you.

Affability is the second pillar of success. This adjective means basically to be likeable or friendly. That goes without saying. One can be the smartest practitioner around and available, but if one isn't kind to people, then forget about success. One must treat others like they want to be treated. It's that simple. If one can't tolerate people, then medicine might be the wrong field for you. Affability is probably more important to primary care physicians. Surgeons don't always have to be affable. Your patients will tell you this. “I don't care if he has good bedside manner...as long as he/she is an excellent (technical) surgeon”.

If there is another specialist that practices your specialty in your area who is a jerk, and somebody that the patients don't like, you will get more consults by default. There is no question about that.

Ability is the third pillar of success. It is not as important as the first two but still key. Most physicians have a level decent ability after 7 to 10 years of medical training. But there are those physicians who have risen to the top of their field, and their reputation precedes them. It doesn't matter if they are a surgeon or proceduralist or a primary care provider. That special ability helps them become more successful in the public's eye. Remember that a reputation takes years to develop. During those years, a reputation is built on quality service and smartness. Trust comes with reputation, and trust is a key to the physician-patient relationship.

Remember prioritizing the three As, and that will serve you well into the future.

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