



Complaints Handling – Saying Sorry

Practice Management

SORRY seems to be the hardest word!

‘The NHS needs to learn to apologise more often - and needs to learn to mean it.’

British bankers recently ‘apologised’ to the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee, but the consensus afterwards was that the apologies did not seem sincere.

The LMC is sometimes asked to review letters written by GPs in response to complaints and the same observation could well apply! Apologies often consist of "We are sorry that you are unhappy with the treatment you received", which in truth is not much of an apology. Sadly, letters can also take the form of an angry tirade against the patient or a long catalogue of excuses. It is always wise to sleep on any letter responding to a complaint in order to review it when you are calmer and more objective.

It is better still to ask a trusted colleague, such as a senior partner or the LMC Medical Secretary, to read through any letter before sending it off. A person receiving a sincere apology knows they have been listened to and that there is genuine regret. This is often sufficient to defuse the complaint completely and effectively.

NEVER use the word “BUT” in your response.

It is essential to accept your own or your practice's part in the error and it is helpful to put yourself in the complainant's shoes to understand more precisely the feelings that have been evoked. The complainant needs to feel central to your concerns. There is also a need for action. It has been shown over and over again that patients want to know that action has been taken to prevent a similar problem arising again. **Faced with an insincere apology and/or lack of action, litigation may be the only way for a patient to gain satisfaction. This is in nobody's best interests.**

Leading healthcare organisations around the world now operate and promote policies of 'open disclosure'. This means not just acknowledging a formal complaint but being proactive when something goes wrong. GPs find it very hard to apologise. They often fear the reaction of the patient or the patient's relatives when feelings are running high. They also believe it may make litigation more likely, whereas the reverse is true. From April 1st 2009 a new complaints procedure came into effect which highlights the need to seek feedback, by way of complaints, concerns and compliments, in order to improve the standard of 'customer' services. The new approach is to be adopted by all health and social care organisations and focuses on six principles:

- Getting it right
- Being customer focused
- Being open and accountable
- Acting fairly and proportionately

- Putting things right
- Seeking continuous improvement

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