About the Presenter

• Bachelor of Health , Aged Care and Community Services
• Australian Institute of Management – Inaugural Medal for Leadership and Management 2008
• Sunshine Coast Business Person of the Year 2009
• Consulting firm for medical centres around Australia and New Zealand and Medical Services Co-ordinator, Bowen Basin
• Registered Training Organisation for medical receptionists and managers
How To Deal With Difficult Patients
What are we hoping to achieve?

• Identify why patients are “difficult”
• Identify characteristics of a “Difficult patient”
• Understand the thoughts and fears of difficult patients
• Understanding whom we are dealing with and what motivates them
• Ideas to help you
Why not just ignore them?

Because we can’t.

At least 1 in 6 patients are “difficult” and we see them every day.
What Makes Patients Difficult or Angry in the First Place?

What makes you angry?

Let's look at some situations which may be familiar:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lAYVUXM7g0

This information has been sourced from people on a community forum on Facebook.
Appointment making and first impression

If the patient is annoyed at the practice, chances are they were already a little annoyed with the service before they even presented! But why?

• Was the patient put on hold for too long?

• Are patient’s being disconnected from the phone call, meaning they have to ring back?

• Is the patient being transferred to numerous reception staff and having to repeat why they are phoning?
Arriving for their Appointment

• Are patients arriving for appointments that has been incorrectly booked e.g. wrong day or time etc?
• Are staff greeting patients with a warm smile and eye contact?
• Are you being too direct, assertive, blunt with patients?
• Do staff look unhappy/angry making patients feel uncomfortable?
Patient waiting time

- Patients may have been waiting for a doctor for longer than expected.
- Patients have not been made aware that there is a delay.
- Staff have not apologised to patients for running late.
Think about how the patient might be feeling. Remember we are often seeing them when they are at their worst!

How Might The Patient Be Feeling?

Anxious

Tired

Sick

Agitated

Depressed

Upset

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And then the patient sees the doctor?

- The patient waited for a long time to see a doctor only to be out in five minutes

- Communication between the patient and the doctor may not be clear causing the patient to be upset

- Doctors can sometimes be “rushed” or in the middle of an urgent matter. However, patient feels neglected because they believe that they have not spent enough time with the doctor

- Patient may not understand medical terminology. Does the doctor speak in layman’s terms
Accounts and Computers

• Was the patient made aware they had to pay for their consultation on the day?

• The patient paid their account and then received a reminder that the account is still owing.

• No first account ever received and then receiving a “Final Notice”

• The IT system is constantly have problems
What if your service has been perfect?

- What if the service from staff was professional and efficient?
- What if all the calls have been answered accordingly?
- What if the Doctors were punctual and running on time?
- What if the patient and Doctor have a good relationship?
- What if the patient has been made aware of fees and there are no issues with accounts?
- Do you educate your patients?
What if the patient is “Just difficult”. 

Again ask yourself

• Could they be tired, frustrated or ill?
• Could they be confused or overwhelmed?
• Maybe they are defending their ego or self esteem
• Maybe they have never been in a similar situation before
• Maybe they feel ignored and feel no one listens to them
• Could the patient be mentally ill?
• Do they speak or understand the language very well
• Could they be in a bad mood and just taking it out on you?
• Are they having a bad day, a bad life?
• Could we remind them of someone they dislike

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The dark side of “difficult” patients

• They are rude to you because they think they will never see you again
• They may be persistently rude due to prejudice to gender, occupation, race ..... 
• They have never been told they are rude and difficult and so they think their behaviour is socially acceptable.
• They have not been brought up with correct manners
How to deal with patients who are difficult

• Let the patient talk until they run out of breath! Listen to their story.

• Be firm. Do not use long sentences. You do not want to put the patient down but you do want to make a statement. Be calm when responding. Keep your voice down i.e.

  i.e. “Please do not talk to me like that. You are making me feel very uncomfortable”

  Or “I understand Mrs. Smith and I am very sorry that you feel that way. How can we fix this?”

• Make sure you deal with this problem in an office or consulting room. Encourage the patient away from the front desk if possible.
• It is important not to be argumentative. Your goal is to defuse the situation.

• Ask yourself, is the patient is being rude or difficult? There is a difference.

• If the patient is being rude, ask them why? This type of question can embarrass the patient especially if they are “performing” in the reception area. It can make people think about what they are doing.

• “Why are you being so rude to me?” or “Can we sort this situation out so you don’t need to be so rude to me?”
• Remember you are in a position of power with many people around you for support? Do not let yourself be bullied.

• However, do not use this “power” against the patient. It may only make things worse.
A patients personal issues with a staff member

- If a patient has personal issues with a certain staff member it is best to try and avoid contact between the patient and staff member.
- If the patient continuously “targets” the staff member, you should ask management to intervene and make a formal complaint.

“I am sorry you feel like that Mrs Jones. These issues with Sally keep arising and obviously upsetting you and the member of staff. We would like you to complete this form to make a formal complaint “
What can the staff member do?

• The staff member can also make a formal complaint. The staff member should also keep diary entries of all incidents.

• Make sure this information is factual.

• It is important that the staff member does not analyse and overthink the situation as it can be upsetting and start to effect the staff member personally.
Some solutions

• The practice owes a duty of care to both patients and staff. So make sure you keep management informed at all times

• If it is a continuous event, it is important for the staff member to talk to their superior i.e. Practice Manager, Doctor etc

• The practice may consider writing a letter to the patient and asking them to find alternative healthcare
Practice Policy and Feedback

• It is important to have a firm policy in place. All staff need to know they are protected from unnecessary issues with difficult patients. Ensure the policy is written and staff know and understand it.

• Organise a patient survey once every six months. This will help you analyse how the patients feel about the practice.

• It is also important that staff members are aware of issues which may make patients difficult.
Finally

“Difficult People are your key to self empowerment, you need to learn how to cope with them, not let them dominate and affect you.” - Janice Davies.