

# What Ever Happened to Irene?



By: Derek P. Greenwood



Typical of our busy, tedious and issue-filled lives at the practice, patients can and have dropped out of our thoughts and out of our records. “What ever happened to Irene?” Irene had been a good woman and faithful patient for years. She had even been in the office just a few months ago, we think. Somehow, she managed to disappear from the appointment book, tragically unnoticed. Has this happened in your office? Undoubtedly it has (believe me) and, you are not alone. It is a chronic, perplexing and embarrassing problem stifling the growth of literally thousands of offices nationwide. As for Irene, she now visits that nice new doctor’s office clear on the other side of town, thank you! Replacing Irene and all her misfortunate counterparts throughout doctor-dom adds up to a fortune, yet rarely do we take the time to ward against its reoccurrence.

Most offices spend tens of thousands of dollars a year to attract new patients. Money gets spent on yellow page ads, newsletters, posters in the office, referral prizes, spinal screenings, business cards, T-shirts, bill boards, and radio and television ads to name a few. Some offices discount their first-time services to attract new patients. Giving away free or discounted exams, discounted x-rays and free consultations are all costing the clinic money for the sole purpose of acquiring new patients.

How much do you spend per new patient? I don’t think I have ever asked this question and received an answer other than, “I don’t know.” In the advertising world, an ad is judged by not only a percentage of increase in sales but by how many leads are generated per dollar spent. In a Chiropractic office you must look at it this way. If you

were to spend \$1000.00 on a small yellow page ad and you received 10 new patients from it, each new patient cost you \$100.00 to generate. A savvy advertising man will look at all of his ads and promotions and figure out how much each cost to generate a new patient. Then, of course, eliminate the least productive while doubling up on those that generate new patients at lower costs. More bang for the buck, so to speak.

Now let’s look at how much it costs you every time you have to say, “What ever happened to Irene?” You, for all intents and purposes, throw away the \$100.00 or so that it just cost you to attract the new patient to your office. Then you waste the \$80.00 or so in the free exam and consultation you gave them to win their trust and to retain them as a patient. Toss out the wages you paid your staff to verify their insurance and start a new file plus the doctor’s time educating them on their condition (time the doctor could have spent with another patient). The more significant chunk of money lost is the irreplaceable future income from a patient will now not be attending your practice. To compound it all there is the potential that his or her grievance may reach other patients ears. It can snowball. If you add to this the fact that the patient may not get the needed care, you begin to see the size of the wound bleeding away your hard work. Money, the prime indicator of growth, profit and potential of any business or practice, is pouring out at a dramatic and uncontrolled rate. Each such occurrence can add up to over \$800 the first year and tens of thousands in an average relationship. Take our reality check; add up your expenses per newly captured patient plus the potential of a lost patient. You will find the totals alarming and discouraging.

## A Stitch In Time...

What can be done about it? Lots! In fact, the uncontrolled bleeding can be totally and permanently stopped. The answer is increased patient retention management. Many attempts have been made to make sure patients come in for their appointments. We have worked hard to ensure that missed appointments are followed up and that future appointments are set standardly. Appointment logs have been created, bonuses have been paid to staff for recovering patients, special future appointment calendars and special appointment books have all been created to handle this problem. The problem is they haven't worked to the degree necessary to stop the problem. If they had, I would not have had to write this article and you wouldn't still be saying, "Whatever happened to Irene." It's a small matter of human error. In order to work, these books need a flawless, hard to find, one-in-a-million assistant who is never ill, lives three doors down and takes no vacations.

Now that we have identified the problem and have found what doesn't work, is there a solution? Fortunately there is. The answer lies in some of the new, sophisticated computerized appointment books. In the past the computerized appointment book was feared and even hated, now it is a necessity, unless of course you like throwing away money or hate to plan your future.

What does a modern computerized appointment book look like? Pretty much like your paper one... but with a twist; it is much more flexible. If you want to change your paper appointment book from 15-minute appointment intervals to a 10-minute interval it requires an entirely new book and you must rewrite every scheduled appointment. A computerized one makes the change in seconds. Want to

change the order of the columns? Easy! It's simple with a computerized book. What happens when a patient calls in and asks when is his next appointment? With a paper book you will frantically start flipping pages trying to find his name. In a computerized appointment book, the answer is only a few clicks away. Plus, you can print copies of the computerized book for any and every staff member. If you have a large practice with multiple computers, you can have simultaneous access to your appointment book from anywhere in the office. This can be an enormous time saver for you but, to a patient, speed of response is one of those intangibles that raises their confidence.

Now, let's discuss the single, most important benefit provided by these new-generation computerized appointment books. Call it Patient Retention Management. Software programs can automatically check and find patients who are late for their appointment. When they find late patients, they notify the front desk person by changing the patient's name on the screen to red and create a notification in a message center for follow up. This message contains all of the vital information including the telephone numbers to contact the patient and reschedule them (Irene is found). Computerized appointment books don't stop there. The message won't go away until the patient is rescheduled and a full report of what occurred is printed for the doctor. This way the doctor need not worry about no-shows while treating patients. By checking the message center report at the end of the day and he will know everything that happened with anyone.

A few of the new generation computerized appointment books also come with a no future appointment feature. Imagine getting a report of everyone who came in today but somehow left the office without a future

appointment set. This report then becomes a call out log to ensure perfect Patient Retention Management. Using this new powerful tool every office could stop the bleeding, deliver more consistent care and make more money.

More good news is that these new-generation computerized appointment books are part of total office management and billing systems. Their benefits don't stop at Patient Retention Management but actually help all aspects of the office. An insurance follow-up center identifies every patient requiring insurance carrier notification for collections. It will also give you a place to note your discussions with them for future reference. This feature alone is an income flow stabilizer and only one of several money-making features found on new generation software packages.

As you can see, by investing in a new-generation computerized appointment book you can stabilize, preserve and grow the income of your clinic. In the past decade I've seen a great many practices prosper and multiply just because they took initiative to get organized and stop the bleeding. Excellence in Patient Retention Management is the answer and the timely new-generation computerized appointment book is the proper tool.

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