

What Was Your Name Again?

Helpful hints for remembering patients' names **BY SUSAN KEANE BAKER**

HEALTH CARE is a relationship business, so the ability to remember the names of your patients is important. Dr. Paula Hall of Indianapolis told me that if a physician remembers a patient's name, it's because of one of four things:

- The doctor is not busy enough.
- The doctor is really smart.
- The patient is really nice, and has probably plied the practice and the physician with food in the recent past.
- The patient is really challenging to work with and everyone in the practice knows his or her name.

While almost everyone can excuse an occasional memory lapse, patients do expect their physicians to care enough to know and use their names. How can you increase the likelihood of being able to remember a patient's name when you need it?

1 Have everyone review the schedule at the beginning of the day. Have you ever had someone approach you and you draw a complete blank on the person's name? And if you have a relative or friend with you, you use him/her as a safety net. "Introduce yourself first—I can't remember her name" you urgently gasp to your friend. If you had seen the name of the approaching person earlier in the day, you would be able to remember the name.

2 Have everyone routinely use patient names when addressing them. Your colleagues can be a safety net. As you enter the exam room, and hear a colleague say, "Dr. Djerf will be right with you, Mrs. Fotiades," you are saved once again from the negative perceptions that could be created by your poor memory.

3 Discover something personal about a patient. Christine Beechner, RN, finds that learning something personal about a patient makes it easy to look beyond the physical reason that the patient has presented for care.

4 Have a system for recording information. Dr. Earl Miller told me

that his time-proven strategy for building rapport with patients is to write down the last thing that the patient told him before leaving. When the patient returns, he glances at his note and remembers the conversation. Remarking on that last conversation creates the perception that he has been thinking about the patient since the last visit, or that he finds the person very interesting. And glancing at the record to recall the last conversation also gives him an opportunity to remember the patient's name.

5 Don't make assumptions. A gastroenterologist entered his office where a nurse was providing information to a new patient. "This is Mrs. Fairchild?" he asked the nurse. "No, this is Mrs. Copeland," she replied. "Well, I'll see her while I am here," he said. Had he spoken directly to the patient, and introduced himself first, the patient would have given her name and he would have avoided the perception that one patient is the same as another to him.

6 Look for cues. A monogram on a shirt or pin or an insurance form to sign can provide enough information to enable you to remember the person's name. Just be careful in distinguishing whether you really remember the name, or are making a best guess. Best guesses don't impress.

7 Create mental pictures. Kathy Pheta-place, RN, teaches people how to remember names and uses her own to illustrate how. She describes how feta cheese appears at a place setting on a table. Feta-place. Wendy Hilboldt, EMT, describes a hill with a bolt of lightning striking it to help people remember her name. If you have a name that lends itself to this technique, describe your name and

then ask if the patient ever does something similar to help people remember his name.

8 Ask your patient about the meaning of his or her name. Darrell Panethiere told me that his name is French for a baker of bread, and as my married name was going to be Baker, discovering the similarity increased my ability to recall his name.

9 Use your patient's name several times during the course of your conversation. Concentrating enough to use the name in conversation creates repetition, which, in turn, aids your memory.

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10 Use the person's name in six silent sentences. For example you might say to yourself: "Her name is Tina Alcott, and Tina is my sister's name. Her name is Tina Alcott and my first grade teacher's last name was Alcott. Tina Alcott—her records will always be easy to locate since her last name begins with an 'A.' Tina Alcott—I wonder if Tina is a nickname for Athena; then she would be Athena Alcott, or AA for short. I wonder if Alcott Park across the street is named for someone in Tina Alcott's family. Tina Alcott—her nickname could be Tiny Tina since she is very petite." This is the best strategy I have learned to remember names!

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