

## What's Your Wait Time?

John Hanks, DC

It was a dream, but it didn't seem like one. I was in my chiropractic office, with the reception area as busy as it had ever been – standing-room-only. No matter what I or my staff did, we could not stay on schedule, getting more and more behind. People were trying to be patient, but there was an undercurrent of tension as they waited longer and longer. Finally, by the end of the day, it was over, with the last patient leaving in a muffled "huff" due to her frustration.

With the staff gone home, I crumpled down in a chair in a corner of the reception room. Then I noticed what looked like a person still sitting behind the overgrown potted plant. Had I missed someone? I walked around the plant and sure enough, it was an older man, sleeping ... or worse. He had day-old whisker stubble on his face, which I hoped had not grown while he had been waiting. I thought I saw a small spider web behind his right ear. Shaking him gently on the shoulder, he began to stir, and suddenly his eyes opened wide.

*And that's when I woke up.* This dream was a true nightmare to me, since one of my greatest fears in practice has always been making patients wait too long. Pandemics and armed robbery aside, nothing has made me more uncomfortable than knowing I may soon be facing an unhappy patient who feels they have waited too long.

When Is the Wait "Too Long"?

"Too long," to me means over 15 minutes, which is not much different than the national average wait time for a physician, 18 minutes, 13 seconds. Who knew there is something called *Vital's Annual Physician Wait Time Report*?<sup>1</sup> It's full of interesting statistics, such as 84 percent of patients reporting waiting time is "very" or "somewhat" important in their overall doctor visit experience. Thirty percent of those asked said they had walked out of an office because of waiting too long.

Apparently the waiting times differ depending on where you live. Patients in Milwaukee barely get comfortable in their reception-area chairs, since waiting times are reported to average 14 minutes, 35 seconds. But in El Paso, Texas, people may well get "long-in-the-tooth," waiting an average of 26 minutes, 50 seconds, according to the report.

I don't quite know how I became sensitized to patient wait time. It may have been when I was a teenager with a bad case of strep throat. I had been waiting with my mother, and a couple of dozen other people in need, when the family doctor came flying through the reception room, waving to the crowd like a rock star. It turned out he had been at the hospital that morning doing his "rounds," as was common in that era, and showed up for his private-practice patients in the afternoon, all of which were scheduled for the same time, 1:00 p.m.

I remember thinking, even at age 13, *This is nuts!* About an hour and a half later, I received a shot in the derrière, which took about two minutes.

Adjusting to Your Patients

My younger patients would never put up with that now. They have "Googling" to do, Instagrams to watch and post, and probably would not be in my office if there was a detailed YouTube showing how to adjust one's own spine. They don't like to wait.

But perhaps I am being too "flip" about their lack of patience. After all, I might rather have a waiting room full of nimble iPhone fans than a few of my elderly, retired patients. Despite valiant efforts, some of them just move slowly, making *me* wait for *them*, which will make my next patient wait longer, and start the "I'm so sorry, but we're running late" excuses.

### Changing Wait Times (and Waiting Rooms) in the Age of the Coronavirus

When the new coronavirus showed up, I became the one waiting ... for the phone to ring. I was at the office much of the time, but was "underutilized," to say the least. I could have read *War and Peace* (the quintessential thick book), three times over during the weeks of the lockdown. Then things opened up a little. Since I practice in an integrative group setting, we wanted to come up with some additional measures to reassure patients we were trying hard to make things safe.

The reception area ("waiting room") became, for some patients, the perceived breeding ground of ebola, plague and perhaps a resurgence of polio. As we know, many people are fearful. So, we moved most of the chairs into the long hallway outside the office, distanced as required. But in my treatment rooms, I tried staging hand sanitizers, and several containers of sterile wipes, which should send a message.

The only good thing about all of this is that I now have an excuse to tell patients, "I hope you understand that you might have to wait a little longer until I can disinfect the treatment room after the last patient."

A goal for my office would be to have a reception room with no chairs ... OK, maybe one or two. No one waits for Dr. Hanks, the "Short-Order Chiropractor"! If there is a list of "Top On-Time Chiropractors" in *Vital's Annual Physician Wait Time Report*, I want to be on it. Perhaps I could even achieve "Most Punctual DC of the Year"! I can see it now: my picture on the cover of *Vital's*! I can't wait!

### Reference

1. Finnegan J. "Report Outlines the Business Perils of Long Patient Wait Times." FierceHealthcare.com, March 22, 2018.

OCTOBER 2020