

# CONFLICT RESOLUTION ON THE TELEPHONE



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# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

Welcome to Conflict Resolution on the Telephone. This interactive package (workbook, video and computer disk), has been developed specifically for healthcare practices. It capitalises on the collective wisdom of individuals in your practice and teaches you how to develop methods and procedures to handle difficult situations.

For most practices, the receptionist represents the first point of direct contact your patients have with your practice. They are usually the first people your patients speak to.

## An effective receptionist should

**Reflect a positive image** of the practice

**Communicate expectations** about your practice to patients before they ever set foot in your surgery.

**Gather good information** from the patient so the time of the doctor or practice administrator is not wasted

**Protect the practice** and not jeopardise it in terms of liability by saying the wrong thing, or giving the wrong information.

Your practice cannot afford errors in communication. Each error costs your practice money and hurts your reputation. Most receptionists welcome clear guidelines about what to say and how to handle difficult situations.

Our Conflict Resolution on the Telephone package gives you the opportunity to be pro-active and preventative.

## Definitions

"Conflict" means different things to different people. In our workbook we use "conflict" to refer to encounters that cause tension. Tensions usually stems from differences in expectations. We are specifically referring to conflict that arises from the telephone.

In our work with practices, we have found the following statements (made on behalf of the practice or someone talking to the practice) represent common scenarios in which conflict arises:

**I want an immediate appointment**

**I want to talk to the doctor now**

**I am cancelling my appointment**

**Would you give me some money?**

**You owe us some money**

**I'm really angry with your practice!**

**Can you tell me what this means?**

Our video has been developed around these seven scenarios. We are proud to say that the video is Australian made, with professional actors and customised to the healthcare profession.

The word "doctor" refers to a doctor, dentist, or principle. When we talk about your "team" we mean your immediate work group.

## **Most Powerful Learning Technique**

The CRT package uses the most powerful learning technique available, namely interactive learning, where participants interactively create a procedure manual that reflects the unique strengths of your practice.

The package presents a model for developing procedures that can be applied to any conflict situation. Once you learn the pattern you can apply it easily. Each section provides an example and a blank space for "your practice" to write in your specific responses and situations. At the end of the workbook you have completed your procedure manual for handling conflict on the telephone. The accompanying computer disk allows you to customise your own procedure manual.

## **Team Philosophy**

The workbook and video combine to form an interactive learning tool. In the process you will have the opportunity to build your team by working together on specific situations that arise in your practice. The success of this workshop depends on the people within the practice helping each other, reminding each other, and creating solutions together. Ideally, your whole practice should work through the process together.

The workbook provides the chance for you to discuss your "worst case scenario" regarding conflict situations. It is critical to work these through with the doctor and clarify the doctor's expectations.

You can conduct the workshop all at once or in a series of steps, depending on how much time you can devote to the exercises and the stage of development of your practice.

## **Telephone Technique**

This workbook builds on the principles of good telephone technique

**Treat others courteously**

**Listen actively**

**Avoid reacting defensively to difficult callers**

**Be confident**

**Speak with authority**

**Be courteous**

**Speak clearly**

**Take notes**

**Ask open questions**

## **Workbook Organisation**

Each problem is presented and discussed according to three components.

**First, the Presenting Problem introduces each section.** This section is labelled a "presenting" problem rather than a "problem" because it represents a challenge from your clients, customers, or patients. It does not become the practice's problem until the challenge cannot be solved.

**Second, the Background component** identifies what you need to know to do your job well. In most instances, you must clarify and understand the practice's policy on various issues. To this end, the videotape provides opportunities to stop the tape and discuss pertinent issues.

**Third, the Strategy section** advises how to maximise your interaction with the patient, client, or customer. Look for the heading marked "Tips" for specific strategies to implement. The strategies invite you to build on the advice after thinking about the scenario and discussing it. Your wisdom and experience become an important part of the learning process.

## Benefits to your practice

Your practice will receive three major benefits from Conflict Resolution on the Telephone.

### First, it will save your practice money!

You will have fewer angry patients.

You will be able to conduct your own training sessions

You will reduce the possibility of litigation

### Second, the package improves the morale of your staff:

Staff who currently feel threatened by difficult situations or intimidated by angry callers become empowered to become part of the solution. Self-confidence grows from knowing what to say and how to handle difficult situations.

Confident staff who promote the practice image help the practice develop positive word of mouth advertising. Staff positively contribute to the practice image.

### Third, the package lays the foundation for a quality assurance system for your practice to become a better practice.

Consistent, professional training and documentation about procedures reduces the number of errors and contributes to consistent quality.

Educating your staff about their role and enhancing their skills moves your practice in the direction of continuous learning.

## Principles of CRT

We have found several principles critical to the successful implementation of the package.

1. Procedures must be jointly negotiated by the doctor and the staff.
2. All staff members must support each other. The doctor must not undermine the authority of the staff and the staff must help the doctor implement the agreed procedures.
3. Everyone must be willing to try different things. If a particular strategy does not work, then change the approach and keep trying until you find one that is successful.

4. Consistency is the key to a successful practice. Patients have a right to expect the same level of service every time they visit your practice.

5. Conduct ongoing sessions where you can share strategies, share success stories, and horror stories so that you can learn from one another.

6. Complaints must be viewed as good information for the practice about ways to improve. This mind shift moves away from being threatened by difficult callers to being empowered to become part of the solution.

7. Expectations (of both doctor and staff) must be consistently clarified, and the agreed responses must be consistently implemented.

8. Documentation is a critical success factor. Recording calls and documenting actions support your quality assurance system.