While most of the literature regarding provider-patient relationships is written to address providers of services, health care administrators must immerse themselves in this literature to understand all the issues related to provider-patient relationships to manage the health care environment effectively. It is important for health care administrators to have this knowledge for several reasons: to support providers in dealing with the complexities facing health care providers every day, to ensure that patients are treated with the utmost dignity and respect and the patients’ rights are not violated, and to avoid or reduce any potential risk for the health care organization that may arise out of improper provider-patient relationships. This unit identifies many of the provider-patient relationship issues that health care administrators must be knowledgeable about, and it offers some suggestions about how the provider can handle problems frequently faced.

The Importance of Training

Health care administrators must have a solid understanding of all the issues related to provider-patient relationships. Having proper training in developing appropriate provider-patient relationships is critical for health care providers, especially skills that pertain to interpersonal communications with an emphasis on engagement, tact, and diplomacy. Although these may seem to be obvious skills and one may think they do not require any development for a professional, they are in fact the basis for many complaints and formal grievances filed against providers.

Dealing With Difficult Individuals

Even in spite of receiving training and demonstrating interpersonal skills such as engagement, tact, and diplomacy, sometimes providers must interact with very difficult or just outright abusive individuals. Providers must also have skills to respond appropriately to these individuals. Difficult individuals can range from someone who wants to occupy the staff or a doctor's time, to someone who is verbally abusive and physically threatening. These situations require an ability to set limits while being tactful and respectful. In most cases, there are reasons for the person’s behavior such as not feeling understood; frustration about his or her health concern or other life events; or dissatisfaction regarding how his or her concerns are being addressed. Generally, the difficult behaviors will subside and a more workable relationship can be developed. In some situations, however, the difficult behavior is so unbearable or harmful to the staff that a provider may need to discontinue the relationship. In cases like this, a provider must make appropriate referrals and not just abandon the patient.

Inappropriate Provider Relationships
A health care administrator must be prepared to respond to providers who demonstrate inappropriate relationships with patients. Addressing an inappropriate relationship that a provider has with a patient may take many forms up to and including a report to the local medical, nursing, or counseling board and may include termination of employment. However, these types of actions are usually in response to egregious behaviors. Most often, health care organizations must have processes to address less serious issues about how a provider interacts with a patient. A very helpful process is to afford the provider an opportunity for coaching, which can be given by a peer or a supervisor. A health care administrator may choose to take a corrective action or disciplinary approach with the provider if coaching does not result in changing the inappropriate behaviors or the behavior has serious issues associated with it. This should be in writing and state the problem behavior, the remedy, and the consequence if the behavior continues.