

# PHYSICIANS PRACTICE

YOUR PRACTICE YOUR WAY

## Five Ways to Help A Small Staff Improve Patient Care

December 29, 2014 | Managers Administrators, Performance, Staff, Training

By Tracy Morris

The pool of talented healthcare staff from which medical practices can draw never seems to keep pace, and expectations among patients have risen dramatically. How can private practices achieve excellence in this new era? The answer cannot simply be more staff.

The key is embracing policies and procedures that help staff provide spectacular patient care. Here are five to consider implementing at your practice:

### 1. Hire for balance

Hiring the right staff is even more crucial for smaller practices. Being at the helm of any practice requires discernment and decisiveness, but when the group is small, sensitivity to balance when making hiring decisions and on a daily basis plays a bigger role.

Fred Loe, a Texas oral and maxillofacial surgeon, puts an emphasis on new hires fitting in with the team.

"We maintain balance in my staff," he recently told *Physicians Practice*. "It is not a matter of finding the right person, but rather blending in someone who likes to work and wants to learn."

Loe's guiding perspective: "The sum of the whole is more important than any individual, including myself."

### 2. Prioritize patient communication

Florida-based cardiologist Adam Splaver believes that at the heart of great patient care is great communication. As a result, he says, prioritizing patient communication must be every individual staff member's bottom line.

Splaver told *Physicians Practice* that attention to interaction among staff and physicians creates a loyal patient. "Listening to what patients have to say, properly communicating that's the core of a successful practice," he said. "It's also why I think one of the biggest mistakes a physician can make is not returning a patient's phone call in a timely manner."

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### 3. Help staff serve as information guides

The Internet and accessibility to information has created a more educated and demanding patient population. David Genet, a Florida periodontist, views this shift as positive.

"The old model of 'doctor knows best' no longer applies," he told *Physicians Practice*. "Empowerment encourages patients to take responsibility for their health and be proactive in their search for options."

Splaver also appreciates the more active role in learning that patients are taking "... by consulting 'Dr. Google,' paying attention to drug commercials, listening to family and friends' advice, and keeping their eyes and ears open for opinions on living a healthy lifestyle."

But, he added, even helpful information can cloud the big picture for patients. As a result, Splaver said he and his staff "have an even more vital role in helping patients sort through the overwhelming data to determine what is and what is not relevant to their own situation."

### 4. Demonstrate top-down loyalty

If the scale must be tipped, you might first need to favor your staff over your patients. After all, a happy staff will lead to happier patients. Respected staff equates to respected patients who respond with loyalty.

Genet shared this tip: "We allot dedicated time daily when no appointments are booked. This allows us to accommodate emergencies and sends a strong message of respect for each patient's time and our value for office organization. The end product: a non-stressful office environment, happy staff and patients, and extensive referrals from them."

### 5. Manage staff size mindfully

As your practice embraces the above policies and procedures, your patient population may grow, and as a result, you may need to add staff.

Attorney Mark Van Brussell told *Physicians Practice* that physicians who want to grow their small practice should tune in closely to state wage-hour laws, especially those addressing overtime, meal and rest periods, and alternative work schedules.

"Too many smaller doctors' offices have a habit of following 'casual' timekeeping and pay policies with their close coterie of loyal employees only to find, after their workforce grows, that a single employee's complaint or an enforcement agency's sudden interest can result in disruptive, time-consuming and costly audits; investigations; possibly litigation; and substantial monetary liability."

Here are a few of his key recommendations:

- With even one employee, and especially with the prospect of adding more, be sure to post any legally required notices in break rooms or other areas where employees congregate.
- Learn the difference between nonexempt employees and exempt employees.
- If you do not have dedicated HR staff, the onus is on you to understand labor codes with which your practice must comply. Consult legal counsel with any questions.