



How Will Your Day Go Tomorrow?

Having written protocols helps your practice run smoothly.

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Practice Management Pearls is a regular feature that focuses on practice management issues presented by successful DPMs who are members of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. The AAPPMM has a forty-two year history of providing its member podiatrists with practice management education and resources they need to practice efficiently and profitably, through personal mentoring and sharing of knowledge. To Contact AAPPMM call 978-686-6185, e-mail aappmexecdir@aol.com or visit www.aappm.com.

Each morning you wake up, and the day to come is a mystery. How full will your schedule be? Will patients arrive early or late? Will there be any unexpected procedures to do? Will there be holes in your schedule due to no-shows? Will there be emergencies that you need to work on?

As a practitioner and business owner, these are the concerns that arise daily, and you simply have to roll with the punches. There is a way, however, to make your day more streamlined and have the majority of your patients' treatments be reasonably predictable. This is achieved by implementing treatment protocols for your office.

What Is a Treatment Protocol?

A protocol is a uniform way to approach your patient who has a particular issue. While some refer to

protocols as a "cookbook," it is not the best way to think of it, since a recipe only allows for one approach. You should think of a protocol as a roadmap. A roadmap will show you the best way to get from one point to another, however you can account for variables, such as a car wreck or traffic, by rerouting and still getting to the same ending point. This is important, because while most of your patients will easily align with your protocols, there are some that, for

will help you avoid making these omissions.

Once you complete your first visit, it's time for the follow-up. What is done when a patient returns and is completely well? How about if there is no change at all? Your second and subsequent visit protocols will delineate what steps you take as you move forward.

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whatever reason, will require a deviation from your set plan. A properly written protocol will allow for those differences (Figures 1 and 2).

Writing your first protocol is fairly straightforward. You should sit down and think about how you ideally approach a plantar fasciitis patient. Write down everything you do for visit one; from the history, to the procedures you perform, to DME you dispense, to the follow-up interval. You are looking for detail. In writing these things down, you may realize some inconsistencies exist when you treat patients today. For instance, if you're running behind, does it affect whether or not you apply a strapping or dispense a night splint? A protocol

ed as a team. This will lead to consistency among practitioners, which is important if one doctor follows up after a partner sees the patient initially. It will also prevent your team from being confused as to how to approach the patient differently for each doctor.

What Do I Base My Protocols On?

The most important factors when developing protocols are clinical outcomes and efficiency. Your protocol will reflect the best practices in your office. There is no right or wrong when it comes to your protocols. For instance, some may administer a cortisone injection to a pa-

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tient with plantar fasciitis on the first visit, while others may prescribe oral anti-inflammatory medication. Both of these approaches can be correct; which route you choose depends only upon your clinical discretion.

When treating your patients with your best practices based on your written protocols throughout all the physicians in your office, you will offer con-

sistency in treating your patients. This will avoid your treating one patient in a particular way and another patient a completely different way. That is a good way to lose credibility in the eyes of your patients, especially if one gets well faster than another.

You have the ability to deviate from your protocol when it is appropriate or necessary. For instance, if a patient comes to you but has started treatment with another doctor, it is

likely that you may not have to start from step one. You may be able to jump to step two or three in your protocol. There usually is not a good reason to repeat prior failed therapies.

Your protocols should also streamline your office's efficiency. A protocol that adds time to each visit is the opposite of what you're trying to accomplish. Part of this efficiency is having your team aware of what

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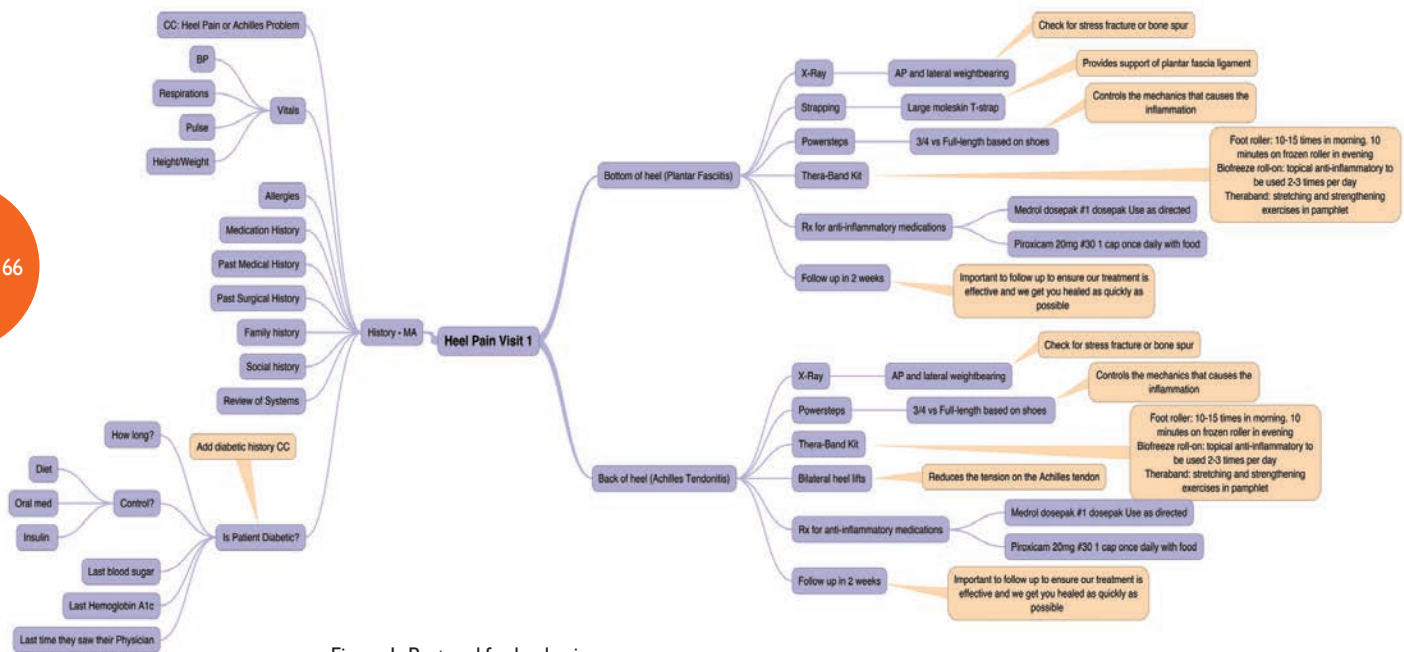


Figure 1: Protocol for heel pain

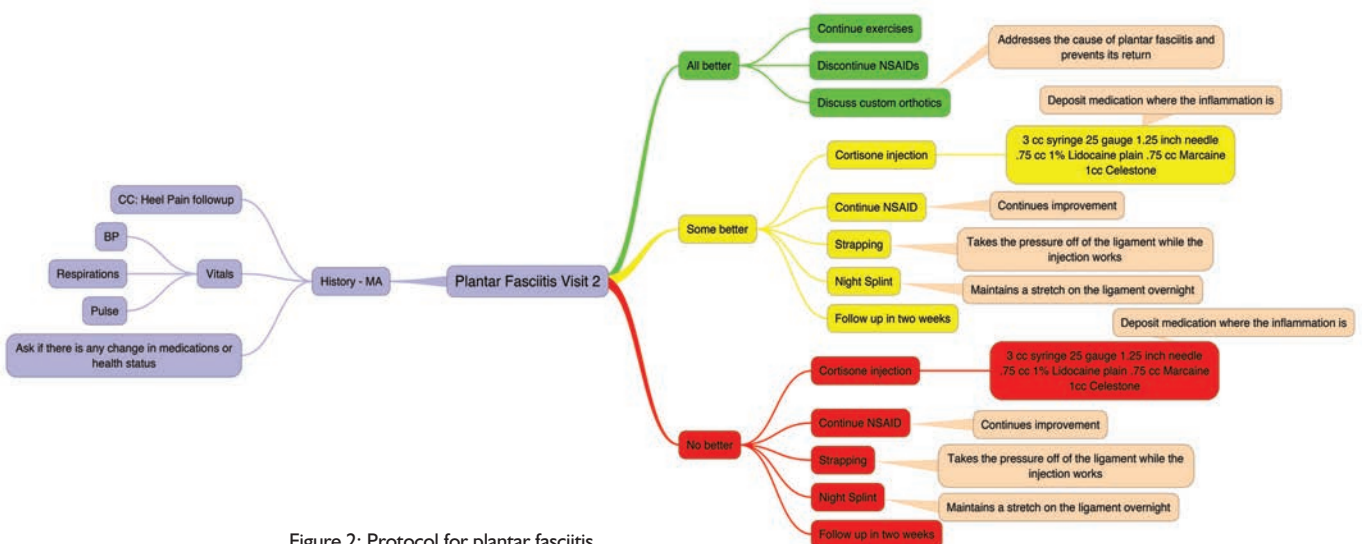


Figure 2: Protocol for plantar fasciitis

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you will likely use in your treatment. For instance, they can have an injection, night splint, or anything else in your protocol ready for you. If you don't use them, that is fine, but it is there if you need to eliminate any wasted time.

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the format, however, does
not matter.**

I Have My Protocols...What Do I Do With Them?

A protocol must be written; the format, however, does not matter. Some practitioners like having an outline form, and others may prefer a flowchart. The format is only dependent on what works best for the practitioner and office. The protocols should be printed in hard copy form, placed in a binder, and located in an easily accessible area in the office. Ideally, there should be a copy of the protocol manual for each member of your team for even easier reference. A copy should also be placed on the public drive of the office's server. With all these

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manuals around the office, there is practically nowhere a team member can be without access to the protocols.

It is not enough to simply have a protocols manual for your office. It becomes a living, breathing document that must be re-evaluated and altered as necessary. For instance, if you decide to bring in a new modality to treat plantar fasciitis, you must add it to your existing protocols. This way, you have your protocols current.

It is essential that you introduce your protocols to your team members. They must understand the protocols and the reasoning behind them. This will allow them to participate in the success of implementation. It will also allow the team members to point out if they feel there are any changes that could be made to make the protocols more efficient. Keep revisiting your protocols at your team meetings to solidify everyone's knowledge and continue training.

Finally, your protocols are a fantastic training tool for new employees. You have developed a detailed road-map that can be consulted by new medical assistants to help guide them through your day, even after their formal training is complete.

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While it seems like a lot of work to put into a manual, the benefits of having set protocols pay off in the day-to-day function of your office. It makes you work more efficiently and allows you to confidently approach your busy schedule each day. Unfortunately, since doctors all practice differently, you really can't just take a protocols manual from another practice and use it in yours. Once you get started, however, you'll find it all makes sense as you go forward. Now start your protocols manual with heel pain, implement it, and then move forward with your next one. **PM**

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