

# There's Power in Protocols

Written guidelines are the key to increased productivity.

BY HAL ORNSTEIN, DPM

*Tips from the Trenches features practice management issues, and is written exclusively for PM by members of the Institute for Podiatric Excellence and Development (IPED). IPED's mission is to motivate, inspire, and synergistically bridge the gap between students, residents, new practitioners, and seasoned veterans in the field of podiatric medicine. They are committed to the idea that mentors with passion to share and mentees eager to learn make a powerful combination that allows IPED to bring and renew a full life to podiatric physicians, their practices, and their well-being throughout the U.S. and beyond. Visit [www.podiatric-excellence.org](http://www.podiatric-excellence.org).*

A common denominator in well-run, efficient and productive offices is that they are fueled and driven by treatment protocols. Chaos and stress can be reduced by putting the effort and resources into development and implementation of these protocols; unfortunately, the vast majority of podiatry practices do not have a comprehensive set of protocols, even though the rewards can be great on many levels. This affects patient care, quality, outcomes, and especially the bottom line.

According to Merriam-Webster, a "protocol" is a system of rules that explain the correct conduct and procedures to be followed in formal situations; a plan for a scientific experiment or for medical treatment; a document that describes the details of a treaty or formal agreement between countries. More specifically for clinical treatment protocols, these are plans for appropriate diagnostic treatment and care services provided to your patients.

Protocols are important to drive highest quality care and best outcomes in your practice. Continuity is the key for best results in the office with as little variance as possible. The many benefits of having written and comprehensive treatment protocols include the following:

- Office staff will clearly understand the pathways for treatment, allowing them to prepare the rooms and work with the patient to save you time with each encounter. In a well-run office, a physician upon entering the treatment room has a good idea what condition to treat simply by seeing what is on the counter. Based on the protocol, office staff places on

staff is when doctors within the same practice approach treatments differently, making it difficult to remember how each physician practices and delivers care.

- Patient waiting time is a common complaint for most practices. Having clear treatment protocols shared by all in the office can significantly reduce waiting time. With the rooms already set up for the doctors based on protocols, staff avoid excessive coming and going to get items needed, resulting in saving significant time for doctors and staff. Time is also saved with staff providing patient education based on protocols with treatment standardized among all.

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the counter all supplies, instruments, handouts, etc. that are needed for that particular condition. For example, depending on your specific protocol, for a new patient with onychomycosis, staff would have placed on the counter: nail instruments, a handout on mycotic nails, a tube for PAS Stain testing, and any over-the-counter items that may be dispensed for one with this nail disorder.

- When integrating new associates and staff, having standard protocols allows them to follow a common plan with everyone on the same page. This results in increased efficiency and better patient flow. Protocols place all physicians on the same page for delivering care, making it much easier for staff to set up the rooms and provide support. A common complaint among

- Chart audits are on the rise with both Medicare and private insurers including both pre-payment and post-payment audits. A red flag is triggered when treatment plans are different among insurers and common protocols are not followed. By showing insurers that you have written protocols, it indicates that you are practicing good medicine and working toward best quality care and outcomes. If they see you are working on providing best care based on evidence-based medicine in your protocols, the relationship becomes more positive and much less adversarial. The insurers will see that you are putting effort into following guidelines, especially for Medicare being compliant with Local Carrier Determinations, which are fur-

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# TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

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ther discussed below.

- The bottom line is an important focus of most practices. Lack of protocols often results in missed services and over-the-counter products. With protocols in place, treatments and services are on auto-pilot delivered from both the doctor and assistants, resulting in increased income and profitability.

There are a number of ways to develop written treatment protocols. Medicare makes their rules for treatment for most common conditions through Local Carrier Determinations (LCD), which can be found with a simple Google search. The LCDs provide information resulting in how one may establish a treatment protocol for certain conditions. From a time management standpoint, one can consider carving out an hour or two a week to develop your protocols. Another

option is to assign the project to your lead back office assistant and pay that person a bonus to complete it.

Each office should have a compliance officer to review charges on a regular basis to monitor if all are following the protocols and deviations communicated. It's important that this is done regularly with a system established so following protocols is reinforced. Outliers can be identified to help further reinforce protocols. This is an ongoing process to ensure treatment protocols are followed and benefits are realized.

Your office staff is a critical component in reaping the benefits of protocols and their training, for such can make or break you. You can make cue cards for them to study based on conditions and number of visits in the sequence of the protocol. At each office meeting, protocols are discussed and new ones presented. They will learn best if rationales for the treatments and expected outcomes are explained.

Your staff's education in this venue can be a powerful tool for patient compliance and ultimately best outcomes for your patients.

Knowing treatment protocols are essential to quality healthcare delivery. There's no time like now to put your pencil to the paper to create them. An organized and uniform approach to treatment unifies and empowers your entire TEAM to provide the best care for your patients. **PM**



**Dr. Ornstein** is Chairman of the Institute for Podiatric Excellence and Development (IPED) and a national and international lecturer and author on practice management topics. He serves on the editorial advisory board of Podiatry Management and the APMA News, and is an inductee in the PM Podiatry Hall of Fame. He is managing partner of Affiliated Foot & Ankle Center, LLP in Howell, NJ.