

# Five Tips to Grow Your Custom Orthotics Practice

Educating patients and referral sources is key.

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*Practice Management Pearls is a regular feature that focuses on practice management issues presented by successful DPM's who are members of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management.*

Podiatry was once known for biomechanics. In fact, it was a defining element in the comprehensive treatment of foot and ankle pathology. As podiatry became more focused on surgery, it seems that biomechanics has taken a back seat. At the same time, many other specialists, including physical therapists, chiropractors, sports medicine doctors, and physiatrists have increased their knowledge of biomechanics and are prescribing custom orthoses. Even orthopedic surgeons are attending biomechanics lectures at their conferences, and many are adding custom orthoses to their services. It is time that podiatry reclaims its position as the lower extremity biomechanics specialty.

Podiatrists often do get frustrated with certain aspects of prescribing custom foot orthotics. Biomechanical evaluations can be time-consuming. Results from custom orthotics can be inconsistent, especially if shortcuts are taken. Many doctors report that their patients can't afford custom orthotics, yet these same patients are seeking relief in "foot health" shoe stores that are overcharging for pre-

fabricated insoles, convincing your patients that they need multiple pairs, and that will not accept returns once they leave the store. Here are five pearls to help you regain control and increase your effective use of custom orthoses.

## 1. Don't Miss an Opportunity to Prescribe a Custom Orthotic

All too often, when treating our pa-

ally correcting it, we demonstrate to our patients the importance of foot health, proper support, and the value of the services we provide. The same holds true when prescribing custom orthotics. Studies have shown that up to 85% of the population has some sort of biomechanical inefficiency. Why, then, are we not capitalizing on that fact, and using our expertise and biomechanical training to recognize

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tients, tunnel vision takes over, and we overlook the opportunity to provide the most comprehensive podiatric care. For instance, we can look at the patient who repeatedly returns to our office for recurrent lateral ingrown toenails. Rather than simply performing an incision and drainage or prescribing an antibiotic to control the infection until the problem can be "permanently" corrected, why not take a closer look at the patient's shoe gear, or take a moment and have a member of your staff measure the size and width of the patient's foot and compare it with the shoes the patient is currently wearing?

By taking a look at the cause of the problem rather than just continu-

who these patients are and what type of orthotic device they would most benefit from?

## 2. Be Your Patients' Doctor...Not Their Financial Advisor

Of course we want what is best for our patients. That does not give us the right, however, to make decisions for them. When I had an opportunity to ask a colleague if his practice offered a discount for a second pair of orthotics, he responded that none of his patients get a second pair. How did I "convince" my patients to get a second pair of custom orthotics? I simply offered them. Too often we look at a patient and make a judg-

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ment as to whether or not they can afford a custom orthotic device. This is the wrong approach.

Our responsibility is to offer our patients the best treatment to correct their foot or ankle condition. It is unfair of us to make the determination as to whether a particular treatment option fits into a patient's budget. That said, it does not mean that we should give our patient a "hard sell" for custom orthotics. It also does not mean that we should not have alternate therapies in mind in case the patient decides to not pursue a custom orthotic. We should simply allow our patients to decide for themselves whether to accept or pass on a particular recommendation.

### **3. Make Sure Your Orthotic Reflects Your Expertise**

When a patient comes into your office with a diabetic foot infection, how many times do you send them to a pharmacy with a prescription stating "antibiotic?" Hopefully that answer is never! Yet, so many of our colleagues send a prescription to their orthotics lab with a prescription that has one box checked off stating, "Lab discretion/post to cast." Your patient is coming to see you for a specific biomechanically-related problem. How do you think that patient would react knowing that a technician who never evaluated him/her was responsible for making the important decisions that would determine the return

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on their investment in custom orthotics?

You owe it to your patients and reputation to take the appropriate time to evaluate your patient and make sure that the specific pathology is being addressed in the prescription. Your patient is putting trust in you and, in many cases, making a sizeable investment in a custom orthotic. Our profession continually states that our knowledge of biomechanics and custom orthoses is superior to the "foot health" stores that are popular. Each of us must do what we can to make sure there is a positive differentiation.

### **4. Educate Your Team About Custom Orthotics**

Are you and your office team members wearing custom orthotics? If you are not, then ask yourself the question,

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"How can I confidently recommend and prescribe a device that I do not truly believe in?" In the same vein, how can your team members answer questions about something that they may not fully understand? The same holds true with any in-office dispensing product or piece of durable medical equipment that you dispense in your office.

Patients look to you and your team as the foot and ankle experts. They are always glancing down to see which type and style of shoes you are wearing, and are eagerly waiting to hear your advice and recommendations on how to end their foot pain. So, why not provide custom orthotics to your team members and educate them on the basics of proper support, offloading, and the benefits of providing such an important service to your patients? In the same respect, your team should be thoroughly trained in proper casting and dispensing techniques that will keep the expectations of your patients realistic and allow you to maximize efficiency and office flow. Over time, you will begin to see that your team can be your most valuable asset in educating your patients, applying your biomechanical training to improve patient care and demonstrating the benefits of custom orthotics through their own personal testimonials.

### **5. Make Sure Your Referring Doctors Know What an Orthotic Really is**

Do your patients, your community, and your referring doctors know what you do? Of course you *think* they do, but it is not necessarily true. Take a minute and think about how many of your referring doctors send patients to your office solely for ingrown toenails? Or, what about local pediatricians who send over large numbers of children with warts, but very little else? The reason for this is that they don't understand your full scope of practice, and neither do your current or future patients.

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The key to expanding your practice and maximizing services such as custom orthotics is to educate and inform. A great way to educate your referring doctors is to invite them to your office and make them a pair of custom orthotics. Provide a thorough gait analysis, explain how common biomechanical insufficiencies can affect stability, gait, and not only the feet, but also the knees, back, and neck. Once these doctors are wearing their new orthotics comfortably and feeling the benefits of proper support, you will soon see your referrals for flat feet, shin pain, and other foot pathology skyrocket. An investment of your time and resources to educate referring doctors, your patients, and your community is an investment in the future success of your practice.

A custom orthotic device is one of the few tangible services we provide. Few patients take off their shoes to show everyone their successful foot

surgery. Most see it as too personal. Many satisfied patients, however, will chime in to a conversation about how their custom orthoses improved their life. Most will even take their orthotic out of their shoe to show it off to a friend. If you do your job right, the next step will result in your raving fan sending friends or family members to your office with the expectation of investing in an orthotic of their very own. PM

*The American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management (AAPP) has a forty-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 AAPP call 978-686-6185, e-mail [aappmexedir@aol.com](mailto:aappmexedir@aol.com) or visit [www.aappm.com](http://www.aappm.com), or circle #150 on the reader service card.*



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