



Practice Management— What Is It?

Concentrate on the six major areas necessary for success.

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This article, written exclusively for PM, appears courtesy of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. The AAPPM has a forty-five year history of providing its member DPMs with practice management education and resources.

This article will help guide you through the subject of practice management with the goal of getting you to think about your practice in two specific ways:

- Improving patient outcomes
- Optimizing your podiatric career for success and enjoyment.

Practice management is a broad term dealing with both the business

of medical care and clinical outcomes. But many misconceptions are out there. It is a mistake, for example, to

partner status or negotiate a better contract. Understanding practice management also demystifies what is in-

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Another common misconception is that it only applies to solo or group practices. Hospital-employed podiatrists or associate podiatrists can use practice management skills to obtain

involved in running a practice, and may open up opportunities to those who have only considered being an employed physician.

In any given situation, it is wrong to assume that practice management is simply a matter of being the best

Continued on page 80

What Is It? (from page 79)

doctor possible, billing for services rendered, and thinking everything else will fall into place. So let's take a look at the intricacies of practice management. Practice Management can be broken down into six components: Clinical Outcomes, Communications, Office Management, Finance, Marketing, and Regulations.

1. Clinical Outcomes

This component includes the services provided at your office, treatment protocols per condition, and the products available at your office to dispense to patients at the time of care. This is the "given" in practice management. If you are not a skilled physician and you don't continue to improve your clinical skills, the rest of practice management is meaningless.

Whether you are a surgical or non-surgical podiatric specialist, you can improve the care you provide to your patients in ways that make sense to you. You should regularly attend seminars that cater to your passion and skill set; but have you ever considered attending a seminar dealing with patient care outside of what you have been taught? Do you feel you have learned it all and there are no other novel ways to improve patient outcomes? Most of us appreciate that we don't know all there is to know. Think of the times you have experienced a moment where you have taken ad-

solution for every patient? You are the foot expert and want your patients to be satisfied with your recommendations and treatments, and you do not want them inconvenienced. By giving them what they need at the time of

one or two treatments that could have sped up resolution and resulted in a much happier patient. This is where treatment protocols come into play. They are standardized reminders of all that can be done to improve patient

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the visit, they will spread word of their satisfaction.

These are the questions and processes asked and implemented by those who see practice management as an optimization of the skills and services podiatrists provide to their patients. It is the pursuit of comprehensive patient care. Seek out seminars that show you exactly how to implement comprehensive patient care modalities that are new to your practice, or that you have wanted to implement but didn't know how to start.

Practice management is all about tracking patient outcomes and quantifying and qualifying patient treatments. These condition-specific treatment regimens are then documented as "clinical protocols." Heel pain, which might seem to be simple, has 30 or more options in treatment, based

outcomes. It also creates uniformity in multi-doctor practices. That is not to suggest that you should practice "cookie cutter" medicine; rather, it is designed to keep all treatment options on the table to maximize treatment and speed patient recovery. Protocols also serve the critical function of providing treatment information to the medical assistant in training and preparation for patient care.

Thus, an essential part of practice is constantly seeking new treatment options, ancillary treatment modalities, product selection and dispensing, and implementation of consistent clinical treatment.

2. Communications

There is nothing more essential than interpersonal communication in the daily functions of office management and patient care. This is a skill that can be learned and improved upon, yet is commonly overlooked. Don't forget, there is a college degree called "Communications", so it **MUST** be important.

Most of us have heard the saying, "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar." In essence, this means there are better ways of saying the same thing in order to obtain the desired result. Communication is not limited to the spoken word. We communicate with our body language, facial expressions, as well as the written word. Even saying or doing nothing at all will have an interpreted meaning. There's no escaping it.

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Continued on page 82

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vice, tried something new, or done something out of your comfort zone that has produced unexpectedly good results.

Do you implement pre-fabricated or custom DME devices? Do you have a vascular or neuropathy center of excellence at your office? Do you use diagnostic and therapeutic devices such as ultrasound, laser, digital x-ray or shockwave therapy? Do you have a convenient and recommended product

on the severity and presentation of the condition. Do you know if 98% of your heel pain patients attain 100% relief within six weeks? Or, do you not know because you are too busy and stuck in a quick "treat and street" mentality in order to get to the next patient?

Even though you have been "doing this for years," consider the significant number of treatment options for every condition. It is easy to forget

What Is It? (from page 80)

with different personality types. Developing this skill will help to avoid miscommunication which can lead to non-compliance in treatment, or a lack of confidence by the patient in the care received. An unfortunate trait of doctors who do understand the importance of the “presentation” to the patient, is their inability to understand its importance outside of the treatment room. Too often, doctors cater to their patients but not their staff. This is a critical breakdown of the office team, which undoubtedly, is perceived by patients.

Application of communication skills to the office team, means providing staff with well-written office and training manuals, protocols, assessment forms, and daily guidance. Office meetings as well as tokens of appreciation all fall under the category of communication. Effective staff communication will result in confidence of performance and lead to a positive and happy work environment. Don’t be fooled into thinking patients do not see or care about unhappy or unskilled staff. Everything your staff does reflects on you, the doctor. You have everything to gain by practicing and implementing good communication skills.

Here are two techniques to help motivate and encourage you. Put ten coins in one pocket at the beginning of your day. Remove a coin from your pocket every time you pay one of your office staff a compliment. The goal is to have an empty pocket by the end of the day.

Another technique is called “book-end critiquing”. Every time you need to speak with a team member about a deficiency or skill needing improvement, start and end the conversation with something complimentary. This will start the conversation on a positive note, defusing a potentially defensive posture, and will end the conversation without the awkwardness of someone having to leave the room after being chastised. You will effectively have changed a negative into a positive, and an unmotivated team member into a motivated one.

Practitioners have everything to gain by attending a workshop that

deals specifically with the art of communication. In conjunction with this, is the implementation of detailed office procedures, protocols, and a customer service manual. Used in the daily operations of your office and in staff training, it will become a motivator and create a positive and happy environment.

3. Office Management

Office management encompasses human resources, employee training, office systems, electronic medical re-

ingful use mandates? Are you aware of the numerous other insurance compliance penalties coming down the pike? You have a window of opportunity to gain tens of thousands of dollars in incentive money, and at the same time, avert the possibility of losing tens of thousands of dollars in penalties. It’s never too late to find out where you stand in this process.

What mechanisms do you have in place to minimize the chance of employee theft? For example, you do not want the same employee to be respon-

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cords, and business and malpractice insurance. The training and oversight of your practice manager is included here as well.

Have you set up an employee training schedule for your new hires with mentorship centered on accountability and achievement? Are you concerned about employee turnover, resources for hiring, procedures for termination, or human resource law? Are you providing benefits for your employees and, if so, are you administering these in a lawful way? If you are a practice owner or partner, you need to be absolutely sure of your answers to these questions. Your staff drives the performance of your practice, and if not managed properly, there are potential legal consequences that can devastate your practice and your personal life. This area must be guided by experts.

Workshops dedicated to these topics can give you the information and resources needed to put together a team of experts who are well-versed in federal, state, and local laws pertaining to your practice. You may need to speak with other experts who have dedicated themselves to office system management in order to guide you in putting together training programs and other related tools specific to your practice.

Do you know the ins and outs of electronic medical record and mean-

sible for both taking in your payments, and the recording and deposit of those monies.

Do you have the proper insurances in place such as malpractice insurance, disability insurance, and business liability insurance? Have you thought about adding additional protections such as errors and omissions insurance or employment practice liability insurance?

This category has dedicated experts and seminars specific to office managers because of the complexities of this position. It would be impossible to go into detail in this article, but suffice it to say, this is one office position that should continue to evolve every year. A wise man once said, “Trust but verify.” No matter how seasoned your practice manager is, you should never trust your office to run on auto-pilot. Is your office manager a skilled team leader and share the same goals as you? Learn alongside your staff and make sure that your office is truly a “team.”

4. Finance

In this category are systems dealing with the cash flow of your business such as billing and coding, insurance contracts, accounts payable and receivable, investments, and money management.

There is nothing more important

Continued on page 84

What Is It? (from page 82)

than being paid for the services you provide, and then protecting the monies you have earned. Are you starting to get the running theme of EVERYTHING being the most important? If so, you understand that nothing in your practice is exclusive to itself, which creates an overlapping mesh of these categories within practice management.

Billing and coding is another area of your practice that is constantly changing. It is national-, regional-, and state-specific. It is so complex a process that the pitfalls can cost you significant monetary losses. Many times, these losses go unnoticed unless a thorough evaluation of your billing and coding is performed. But done the right way, it can help maximize the return on your investment of time and money. Do you know if outsourcing your billing or keeping it in-house is right for you? When was the last time you or your office staff attended a billing and coding seminar? Do you know precisely what constitutes each level of E&M code or do you just err on the “safe side” by down coding? Did you know that DME distributors are often mistaken in the codes they provide for their products? Are you following their advice or are you checking with Medicare and your local carriers? When was the last time you checked your BMAD data?

If you are confused by these capital letters, it's time to do something about it. It is not uncommon to see billing and coding experts at these seminars comparing notes and learning every day. Doctors who have been in practice for years attend these conferences to find out that they have been missing or inappropriately submitting codes. Even doctors who find this topic tedious or boring are energized as they learn how to become compensated fully for what they do.

As money comes into your office, how do you handle it? Have you considered a check scanner in your office for immediate verification of sufficient funds and check deposits? Sitting in a workshop with an impartial banker and front office specialist will answer these questions and help streamline your cash management. These

eye-opening experiences will raise questions you didn't even know you had.

What financial reports do you run each month to assess the health of your practice? Are you looking at your accounting to include a balance sheet, detailed profit-loss statement, and CPT utilization report? Are you using industry-standardized benchmarking as a guide to practice success?

Finding ways to improve your practice is one thing. Knowing how to identify and fix practice issues is

any further care is needed will identify a significant number of patients who are still in need of your services. You will find that many have been meaning to come in for a visit but do not act until receiving your call.

Advertise to your patients by placing a list of your services on the back of your business and appointment cards. You will be surprised at the number of patients who comment, “I didn't know you did that.” It may also spark a thought of a friend or relative who suffers from

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another. Do both! There is no better feeling than finding out how simplistic it is to manage your finances, when all along you either thought it was too difficult or just didn't know where to start. Want to start? Well look no further than the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management (www.aappm.org) seminars to show you exactly how to do this, what to look for, and how to benchmark your practice's performance. Seminars and other resources provided by the AAPPM and its experts in all categories of practice management are designed to help every level of podiatric practitioner.

5. Marketing

Advertising and Marketing can be an expensive proposition, while at the same time delivering little in return. If you don't track your return on investment (ROI), you will never know where your hard-earned dollars are working most effectively. Luckily, there are very effective ways to market your practice that cost very little, yet produce big results.

Are you engaging in internal marketing of your practice? What about community-based marketing? These are areas you can target tomorrow to increase your patient load. It is inexpensive to search your patient database for patients who have not been to your practice in six months or longer. Making a call to these patients to see if

one of these conditions.

As a thank you, send snacks over to offices that regularly make referrals to you, and watch the new referrals appear the very next day. Keep in mind that it is the staff in many offices who are responsible for referrals, not the doctor. There is a reason pharmaceutical reps continue to pester you with reminders of their products—because it works! Also target doctors who should be sending you patients, but have not. Make sure these doctors are aware of the scope of the treatments you provide. Consider providing them with easy to fill out referral pads. It may take a couple more times for them to get the message, but don't give up.

Marketing experts can guide you with regional trends and creative ideas to jumpstart your marketing or advertising program. If you are not a social media wizard or web page expert, that's okay. Experts can provide these services for reasonable fees. They can also track your results and guide future courses of action. There are many more ways to increase your exposure, and as a result, the number of patients you see on a daily basis.

6. Regulations

The most reviled but essential parts of practice management are rules and regulations. Regulations include

Continued on page 86

What Is It? (from page 84)

HIPAA, OSHA, patient charting, billing and coding, human resource law, Medicare and DME compliance issues, local and state business laws, and Stark laws.

Since not playing by the rules can cost you your license to practice, if not large monetary losses or worse, they must be understood and followed on a daily basis. One of the best analogies as to why we neglect this vital practice area is likening it to the sport of golf. Every golfer wants to lower his/her score. The weekend golfers spend most of their time on the driving range and very little on the putting green. Although the easiest and fastest way to lower one's golf score is through improved putting, we gravitate to the driving range because driving a golf ball is much more fun and fulfilling than putting.

Well, it's time to putt. If you do not have an attorney who specializes in healthcare law, find one. If you have implemented EMR and attested to receive your incentive money, you have in fact told the government you have implemented the required HIPAA securities, which are fairly complex and extensive. Very few individuals know what this means or how to accomplish it. Fortunately for us, there are experts and companies who do exactly that.

Doctors would be mistaken if they thought OSHA regulations were a thing of the past. At seminars dealing with

comprehensive medical compliance, you hear stories of the offices that have had surprise visits and the results of those inspections.

If you dispense DME or wound care products to Medicare patients, you should be very familiar with the extensive charting and paperwork involved in every transaction. This is not part of being overly-cautious; this documentation is a federal requirement. In addition, there are 31 standards that must be followed as part of your office's DME compliance program. You may be doing everything right for your patients and have all of your charting and billing spot on, but if you do not follow these very stringent requirements, the former is meaningless in the eyes of the

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government or independent RAC Auditor. There are a number of other regulations currently in place, and more quickly approaching.

In conclusion, it is easy to see why practice management is so dynamic and essential. Getting involved in practice management is akin to getting a personal trainer. You want to do it and know that you should but you just need something to inspire you to do it. Most want to know what are the most effective and expeditious means of getting results.

Keeping up with current and future changes in rules, regulations, and coding changes is absolutely essential. Both time and money are involved in running your practice properly. The time and costs associated with practice management pale in comparison to the time, money, and other potential losses incurred by poor or inadequate management. This article may very well inspire practitioners to rethink their practices. In some cases, this information may actually scare practitioners into learning the intricacies of comprehensive medical practice management. If you have never attended a management seminar, do so. You will not only find it informative, but inspirational and fun too. **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 aappmexecdir@aol.com or visit www.aappm.com.



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