

Problem Solving in the Medical Practice

Use the *five whys* to get to the root of the problem.

BY NEIL BAUM, MD

Reprinted with Permission from *The Journal of Medical Practice Management*, Nov/Dec 2018, pgs 177-170, copyright 2018 Greenbranch Publishing, LLC, (800) 933-3711, www.greenbranch.com.

There isn't a doctor or a practice that hasn't experienced a problem or a crisis either in the care of patients or in the business aspect of the medical practice. Unfortunately, doctors have few or no skills in crisis management or in non-clinical problem-solving. This task is often left to the office manager or the medical director of the practice. This article will discuss the use of the root cause analysis and how it can be applied to nearly every medical practice.

The *five whys* concept is a way to try to find causes of potentially complex problems. When done properly, this strategy will help you to get to the root cause of many types of issues so that it can be addressed, rather than just focusing on symptoms of that problem.

When done properly, this strategy has been shown to not only be effective, but also easily be used on a wide range of issues throughout many medical practices. It can also be combined and used with a variety of other techniques to identify and solve workplace problems.

The *five whys* technique began in Japan at the Toyota Motor Company. It is based on a scientific approach to problem solving. Since then, the *five whys* method has been applied through just about every type of industry around the world and could

easily be used in the healthcare profession as well.

The *five whys* process is where you ask why at least five times in order to get to the root cause of a problem. The process starts out with a problem that is impacting the practice, and then keeps asking why things happened until the root cause of the issue has been identified.

One of the best ways to get a good understanding of the *five whys* is to look at examples of how it can

recommended service schedule

The last why is considered the root cause of the problem. If the owner of the vehicle would have followed the recommended service schedule, this issue would not have happened. Not only that, but following the recommended service schedule will help to prevent a wide range of other problems including those with the radiator, brake, and oil fluids.

An example of the *five whys* process applied to the healthcare practice:

The process starts out with a problem that is impacting the practice, and then keeps asking why things happened until the root cause of the issue has been identified.

be used in the medical practice. The following example is commonly given to discover the root cause of a car that will not start. So, "The Car Will Not Start" is the initial problem. From there, the *five whys* are asked.

- Why won't the car start?—*Answer:* The battery is dead.
- Why is the battery dead?—*Answer:* The alternator is not working properly.
- Why isn't the alternator working?—*Answer:* The serpentine belt has broken.
- Why did the serpentine belt break?—*Answer:* It was not replaced when worn.
- Why wasn't it replaced?—*Answer:* The owner did not follow the

The problem to solve is why is the practice one-hour delayed in seeing patients by mid-morning when the practice is supposed to start seeing patients at 9:00 AM? *Answer:* patients are coming 30-60 minutes late for their appointments.

Why are patients showing up late for their appointments? *Answer:* the doctor is usually 30-60 minutes late and patients don't want to wait to be seen by a chronically late doctor so they arrive and check in 30-60 minutes after their designated appointment times.

Why is the doctor 30-60 minutes late by mid-morning? *Answer:* the doctor arrives for his office clinic 30

Continued on page 154

Problem Solving (from page 153)

minutes late because patients are usually not taken to the exam room until 9:30. Instead, the doctor goes to his\her computer to check Emails.

Why does the doctor arrive 30-60 minutes late each morning? *Answer:* patients are placed in the rooms by the staff at 9:15-9:30 and not ready for the doctor until 9:30. Why are patients put in the rooms 30 minutes after their appointments? *Answer:* The staff doesn't arrive until 8:30 and are not ready to place patients in the room until 9:30.

Solution: Start the day at 8:00 A.M. and start putting patients in the room at 8:45. Inform the doctor that he should arrive in the office by at least 8:45, giving him a few minutes to look at his\her computer and that the doctor is to start seeing patients promptly at 9:00.

Finding the Root Cause

The primary goal of the *five whys* is to take a problem and find the root cause so a solution can be identified and solved. When done properly, a practice can find the root cause of most problems so that they can take

actions to prevent it from happening in the future.

One of the best things about the *five whys* is that it is inexpensive to implement. A medical practice or a hospital can begin using it without added expense. The only cost is the time required to go through the process.

- Preventing problems before they occur.

- Gathering information for identifying other issues that are impacting the practice.

- Placing an emphasis of quality and safety over speed.

Every practice is unique, and all

When done properly, a practice can find the root cause of most problems so that they can take actions to prevent it from happening in the future.

Why Look for the Root Cause?

Most medical practices solve problems by identifying a problem and use a quick fix for prompt resolution. In the long run, it is much better to identify the root cause of the issue, fix it, and that will prevent the problem from occurring again. Seeking a root cause solution rather than just addressing the symptoms provides practices long-term benefits, including:

- Reduced re-occurrence. By dealing with the root cause, the symptoms are less likely to happen again in the future.

workplaces have their own set of problems that they need to deal with. Implementing the usage of the *five whys* can help medical practices to better understand their issues, and give them a clear roadmap on how they can be addressed permanently.

Root Cause Analysis Tools and Techniques

The most common approach to identifying the root cause is the fishbone technique. The fishbone technique gets its name from the fish-like look that is developed when writing

it down. Figure 1 is an example of a fishbone diagram.

In this option, the tail of the fish is the main problem, each of the whys goes along the sides, and the final effects (or root cause) are at the head or up front. This allows those performing the *five whys* to easily write down known problems along with the *whys* that helped to find them drill towards the solution.

Getting Started with the Five Whys

The *five whys* system can be customized based on the specific needs of a given practice. Most practices or hospitals that are implementing this type of

Continued on page 155

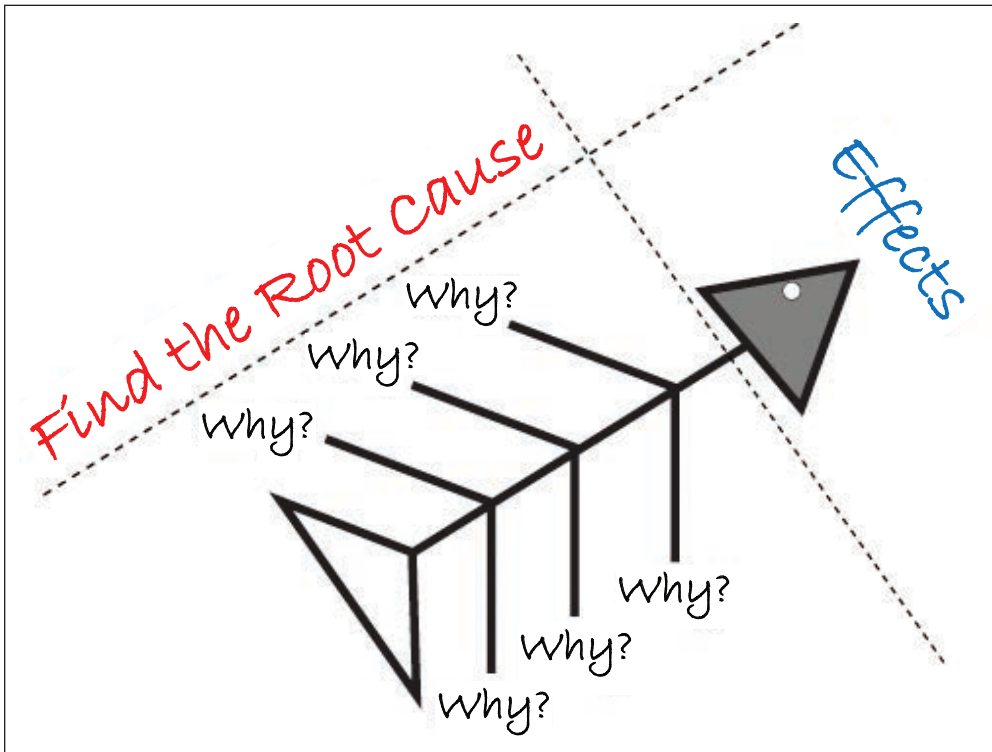


Figure 1: Fishbone Diagram

Problem Solving (from page 154)

strategy will use some general rules or guidelines that can help keep the strategy focused on finding the root cause of the problem. Here are a few rules of performing the *five whys*:

- Form the questions from the patient's point of view. Example of a problem from the patient's stand point: patients are not happy to be seen 60-90 minutes after their designated appointment or patients complain that they don't receive results of lab tests or imaging studies 2-3 weeks after the test or the procedure.
- Keep asking/drilling until root cause is discovered, even if more than *five whys* are required.
- This strategy is looking to find the root cause of the problem and not to place blame on any person(s) in the practice.
- All statements should be based on facts, not assumptions or hearsay.

- Office managers or leaders must explain that the purpose of the root cause analysis process is to focus on fixing or correcting the error and the systems involved. Make a point of stressing that the purpose

effort not to introduce or create a new problem that is worse than the original issue that you are attempting to solve.

The primary aim of root cause analysis is: to identify the factors that caused the problem that may even re-

The *five whys* system can be customized based on the specific needs of a given practice

of the analysis is not to assign blame but to solve problems.

- Ask the question why until the root cause is determined. It is important to understand that in healthcare there may be more than one root cause for an event or a problem. The difficult part of identification of the root cause often requires persistence; keep asking *why* to determine the root cause(s).
- Finally, after the root cause is

sult in harmful outcomes; to determine what behaviors, actions, inactions, or conditions need to be changed; to prevent recurrence of similar and perhaps harmful outcomes; and to identify solutions that may promote the achievement of better outcomes and improved patient satisfaction.

To be effective, root cause analysis must be performed systematically using the *five whys* to drill down to the seminal event that initiates or produces the problem. The best result occurs when the root cause is identified and then backed up by documented evidence. In order for this systematic process to occur, a team effort is typically required.

It is important that the group which identifies solutions that will be implemented enjoys the agreement of the group.

• Make sure to clearly distinguish the causes of problems from the symptoms of the problem. Example: Doctor doesn't start on time is a problem. Patients are upset is a symptom.

- Engage physicians, nurses, administration, and ancillary personal as needed.
- Focus on long-term success rather than short term or quick fix solutions.
- Write down the problem at the top of a white board or flip chart and make sure that everyone understands the problem.
- Try to make your answers more concise and precise.
- Be patient and don't jump to conclusions.
- Focus on the process, not on blaming people.
- A root cause analysis should be performed as soon as possible after the error or variance occurs; otherwise, important details may be missed.

identified, conclude with the solution which will prevent the error from occurring again.

It is this last step of identify corrective action(s) that will prevent recurrence of the problem that initially started the analysis. It is necessary to check that each corrective action, if it were to be implemented, is likely to reduce or prevent the specific problem from occurring.

The purpose of identifying solutions to a problem is to prevent recurrence. If there are alternative solutions that are equally effective, then certainly the simplest or lowest cost approach is preferred.

It is important that the group which identifies solutions that will be implemented enjoys the agreement of the group. Obtaining a consensus of the group that all are in agreement before implementation takes place is important and that everyone buys in to the solution. You want to make every

Bottom Line

Root cause analysis can help transform a reactive culture or moving from one crisis to the next into a forward-looking culture or a practice that solves problems before they occur or escalate into a full-blown crisis. More importantly, using the *five whys*/root cause analysis reduces the frequency of problems occurring over time within the practice when the process is used. **PM**



Dr. Baum is a physician in private practice in New Orleans. His major area of interest and expertise is practice management; he has spoken nationally to doctors and medical staffs about practical ideas that every physician can adapt into his or her practice. He has written over 1,000 articles and six books. One of his books, *Marketing Your Clinical Practice—Ethically, Effectively, and Economically* has sold over 125,000 copies and has been translated into Spanish.