



Creams
Lotions
Nail Treatments
Pain Relievers

Comfort Shoes
Post-op Shoes
Socks

Compression Hosiery
Wraps
Post-op Splints

Nail Polish
Gel Devices
Corn/Callus Treatments

Insoles
Night Splints
Pads

What You Need to Know About In-Office Dispensing

These products increase patient convenience and compliance.

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Today, however, many podiatrists, from the general podiatrist to the pediatric specialist to the foot and ankle surgeon, engage in dispensing anywhere from a few to many items from the office. It con-

Best Practices for In-Office Dispensing

As with anything done in the office, it is vital that there is an established system related to the in-office dispensing efforts. A system is a set

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Not so long ago, an article about in-office dispensing would require a fair amount of convincing the practitioner to engage in such activity. Physicians were cautious about coming off to their patients as salesmen rather than doctors. It was also hard for them to understand why they should offer products in the office when they could simply recommend that patients purchase similar offerings in the pharmacy or online.

tinues to remain true that practitioners will only dispense items that match their comfort level. That is an important litmus test to determine what items one chooses to carry in the office. Simply recognizing that there is value in dispensing products from the office allows us to keep an eye open for the next good fit for the office.

way that every person in the practice approaches a particular task. Knowing whose "job" it is for each step of the dispensing process is vital to make sure that the product is discussed and handed to the patient, and that proper instructions are given so the patient will be successful in using it. There is no correct way for

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a system to be created and implemented. It is only necessary that it is one that is easily followed and can be used consistently by the team.

For instance, the practitioner determines the need for a stretching device to be dispensed. The doctor will mention the device, why it is needed, and what it will do for the patient. After the doctor's time with the patient is complete, the medical assistant will then come into the room. She will present the device to the patient along with instructions for its use. The assistant may also demonstrate the proper use of the device and watch the patient try it. Finally, the medical assistant will ensure that payment will be collected for the purchase. This can be handled with a portable credit card reader or simply by communicating to the front desk upon check-out.

In order for a system such as this to be successful, it is important to have effective staff training. Unfortunately, training is often something that is only done with a new hire, and even then, it is not always done in a reliable manner. Running an efficient practice requires regular training and retraining to ensure

ing for a dispensing product. By developing a script, you can ensure that your message is consistent, no matter who is delivering it. It does not have to be overly complex. A good script can essentially be an outline with talking points to ensure that the main points are delivered.

For instance, a script for dispens-

Another reason not to bring a product into the office is price. Very often there is a product that is predicted to be helpful. The practitioner can see it being incorporated into the office protocols and it would complement treatment well. Unfortunately, the price to acquire the product can be too high. Once the product

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ing an off-the-shelf medical grade insole could resemble this: "This insole is designed to provide support to your arch and provide overall stability to your base of support. It easily transfers from shoe to shoe. If the sock liner of your shoe pulls out, then remove it and replace it with the insole. If not, just put the insole on top of it. We recommend that you wear the insole as much of the time as possible."

Beware of Selecting the Wrong Products for the Practice

There are many opportunities to incorporate dispensing items into a

is marked up for sale, it can be very difficult to establish the benefit to your patient to justify the cost. If this is the case, be sure to tell the vendor that this is the reason for your hesitation. That vendor may respond by offering an introductory rate to test the product in the office. One also can search for competing products to reduce the cost of acquiring it, and ultimately the final sale price.

Unless a new product is definitively one that will be a perfect fit, ask for samples and develop a test market. Depending on what the product is, the test market could be family, office team members, or select patients who are given products to try and report back on their use. A test market is invaluable. It offers the opportunity to try a new product in real-practice situations and determine if it is well formulated, easy to use, and effective for what it is meant to treat. The test market can also give you ideas on how to market the product and a guideline for what will be a fair price.

The test market can also call your attention to deficiencies in a product. Perhaps one will find a cream to be too tacky or that it separates too easily when not in use. Another may find the Velcro associated with an ankle brace to lack the strength to keep it from coming undone. Perhaps the brace squeaks when it is in use. These are all circumstances that would not be noticed on first look but can be determined with use. Until a product is used regularly, it is often difficult to determine any drawbacks.

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consistency. When a new product is brought into the office, it is crucial that it is presented to the team. This way, everyone is on the same page as to what the product is for, how it is used, the cost, and who is responsible for what stage of the dispensing process. That is still not enough.

When something is not reinforced through retraining, the workday becomes sloppy and the system becomes less effective. This is one reason why office meetings are so important. A component of these meetings should always be reserved for retraining.

Scripting

Scripting is something that is also important when developing messag-

podiatric practice. Any exhibit hall visit at a podiatric conference will include access to a wide variety of products that can benefit a practice's patients. Of course, there are usually a number of products there that will not resonate with you for any number of reasons. First and foremost, if the practitioner does not believe in the product, for whatever reason, it is not recommended that it is brought into the office. Some of these products may even be ones with a high margin and the potential income to the practice can be enticing. Introducing a product that is not believed in to the office, however, is never going to be effective and there will ultimately be a surplus of product in stock that is never dispensed.

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In-Office Dispensing for the General Podiatric Practice

The general podiatric practice presents significant opportunity for in-office dispensing. Any treatment protocol can be complemented and enhanced with products that are purchased by patients directly from the office. The goal is not simply to capture the cash fees for these items; dispensing allows patients to get what they need easily, and it also facilitates compliance with the treatment plan.

For instance, if a patient comes in with plantar fasciitis, there are a host of stretches that you can share. You can recommend that the patient freeze a water bottle to roll under the foot and stretch using a towel. Alternatively, you can dispense a well-packaged kit that has a small foam roller, physical therapy resistance band, and even a topical analgesic. The patient is more likely to use this kit than to following the other steps on his/her own.

A patient who needs biomechanical support can be provided with a list of insoles to purchase in an athletic shoe store, where it is not known if the correct product will be available. Instead, medical grade insoles can be stocked in the office to be placed directly into the patient's shoes. This is a convenience for the patient, but also ensures the proper care to provide the expected result.

Stocking items for purchase in the office does not always have to have a treatment attached to it. For instance, many have found success dispensing "healthy" nail polishes that do not have harsh chemicals such as formaldehyde or toluene, and nail polish removers that don't have acetone. Patients today are becoming increasingly health-conscious and are more aware of what they are putting in and on their bodies. Products such as these give patients peace of mind knowing that they are able to trust what they are purchasing from your office.

In-Office Dispensing for the Pediatric Practice

Practices that see many pediatric patients also have the ability to engage in in-office dispensing. Many products that are geared to children are not available in the marketplace. Rather than sending the patient's parents searching on and offline for a product, it is a welcome convenience to be able to obtain the product at the office. This way the patient's family knows that they are getting the right product, straight from the doctor's office, and can have any questions answered before they find themselves at home with the product.

Any practice that treats children should have pediatric insoles in stock. The pediatric foot differs from the adult foot and often requires a deeper heel cup and increased stability. There are pediatric insoles that provide these features and allow the patient to have them in the shoe before departing the office. Sometimes the insole is dispensed as a precursor to a custom orthotic. Other times, however, the off-the-shelf insole is all that is needed at the time. Having these insoles in the office allows the pediatric patient to be catered to and ultimately will increase referrals from both patients and pediatricians alike.

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Another common pediatric concern is plantar warts. No matter how the practice treats warts, it is helpful to send the patient home with a

soaks after toenail surgery in favor of dressings with a hydrogel. These products could be as simple as a stand-alone tube of hydrogel or one included in kits that also have saline, gauze pads, and adhesive bandages.

patient should be forced to purchase a product as the only option.

In-Office Dispensing for the Surgical Practice

Many practices that have a major focus on surgery historically do not wish to involve themselves in in-office dispensing. This philosophy is changing. The surgical patient wishes that the surgery will go smoothly and of course wants to be able to recover quickly and efficiently, but there may be challenges along the road to recovery. Surgeons don't always see these things as inconveniences, but rather what comes along with having foot surgery.

There is no foot and ankle surgeon who allows patients to get their foot wet immediately after surgery. In most cases, the foot must stay dry throughout the early post-operative course. There are many options available to protect the dressings

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product that can be used between visits. These treatments are often effective in ensuring complete resolution of the wart. Furthermore, by applying a product at home, the patient and parents feel that they are actively involved in the resolution of the wart.

Ingrown toenails are also a very common condition in children. Many practices have shifted away from foot

Providing these products in the office allows the patient to receive them at the point of care and prevents the need to piecemeal the products together in the pharmacy. Of course, should a patient not wish to purchase the kit, or any product for that matter, there should always be alternatives available. In this case, an instruction sheet on what to purchase for soaks or other aftercare can be provided. No

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while the patient bathes. Find the favorite and stock it in the office to be offered prior to surgery. This gives the patient a worry-free way to shower after surgery and will prevent the aggravation and wasted time involved if the patient gets the dressing wet.

Many surgeons also recommend supplements to speed the recovery. These supplements often include vitamins, minerals, and hydrolyzed collagen to promote healing. Offering them allows patients to help influence the rate of recovery and get themselves to full activity sooner. Treatments for scar care are also available to be dispensed. These are perfect after sutures are removed and

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help to reduce scar sensitivity and allow the scar to thin and fade. Providing patients with the ability to influence healing allows them greater control of their outcomes.

It's Time to Up Your Game

If a practice has not had the opportunity to stock and dispense products from the office, now is the perfect time to start. Go to your next podiatric conference with the intention of finding the one perfect product to carry. Get a variety of samples of other products to distribute to your test market and allow feedback on what to use and what to stay away from.

For those who already stock products in the office, why not add more? Patients are always looking for something that helps eliminate pain, resolves problems, and gets them well faster. If that can be accomplished with a product dispensed from the office, it is a win-win situation. Just remember that it is only a recommendation. Never should there be a hard-

sell in the office. While it is rare for a patient to refuse a product, simply offer an alternative for another product that is available commercially. Don't let those rare instances dissuade you from providing this convenience; most patients will appreciate the opportunity to receive products directly from the office. **PM**



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