# Improving Your Practice

When doctors and staff put their heads together, good things happen.

BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

***To Our Readers:*** *There are no foolish questions. Chances are that if you have a question or concern in your practice, others are experiencing a similar situation. We're here to help. PM [doctor and staff] readers are encouraged to submit questions to soslynn@gmail.com which will be printed and answered in this column anonymously.*

**Topic: An Exercise in Self-Observation**

*Dear Lynn,*

*We never talk about making resolutions in January like most others. Instead, it has become an annual exercise for our team (doctors and staff) to set aside time mid-year and sit down, put our heads together and find new, unexplored ways for us to improve our practice. If you were to offer your five most effective business improvements, what might they be? Prioritize which areas you feel are your most noticeable underperformances. Then, with the help of your team, tackle one item at a time at a suitable pace, checking each off the list when completed. Remember that undertaking too much all at once can result in overload and a disappointing outcome.*

**1) Bridge the Internal Gap of Communication**

❒ Have regular staff meetings to encourage group input and ideas/Be open to change
❒ Distribute (confidential) staff surveys as a learning tool
❒ Conduct written annual performance reviews
❒ Actively listen; show concern and interest in staff as "people", not just "employees"
❒ Give constructive feedback
❒ Encourage an open-door policy to discuss any staffing concerns

**2) Practicing "Good" Management**

❒ Don't micromanage
❒ Activate
❒ Consider management surveys for self-improvement
❒ Verbalize *genuine* appreciation and acknowledgement to staff
❒ Lead by example
❒ Practice respect, equality, and fairness regularly
❒ Follow "Golden Rule" management
❒ Say "please" and "thank you"
❒ Praise loudly; reprimand softly

**3) Update and Uphold Policies**

❒ Discuss/explain the NEED for office policy/rules; review annually
❒ Compose comprehensive, written financial policy for patients; be prepared to answer all their questions
❒ Detail to staff how collections are expected to be handled at the front desk, copays, receipts, deductibles, documentation, etc.
❒ Billing policies (statements, complaints, collection agency)
❒ Insurance follow-up/appeals process
❒ Employee HR policies/clear description of benefits/ clarification of paid/unpaid leaves of absence/Disciplinary: review warnings, procedure and actions
❒ Distribution and expectation of updated employee and procedure manual contents
❒ Patient appointments: online appointment requests, no shows, late, wait list, reminder calls, new patient paperwork, etc.
❒ How to deal with interruptions during office hours (patient and personal phone calls, vendors, questions)

**4) Are You an "Exceptional Customer Service" Provider?**

❒ Outline telephone etiquette expectations
❒ Role play phone scenarios focusing on appropriate staff responses (within their scope)
❒ Create an educational cheat sheet of the most common Q&As for staff to reference
❒ Patient greetings and attentiveness/guidance
❒ How to effectively deal with difficult patients
❒ Discuss methods to effectively reduce wait time ("patient parking") in reception area and treatment room

**5) Professionalism: Pure and Simple**

❒ First impressions matter/dress code review/personal hygiene
❒ Focus on attitude, compassion, knowledge, respon-

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sibility, integrity, ethics, image and appearance

❒ Expected employee behavior and standards of conduct

❒ Be a team player

**6) Indeed, Proper Training *Makes. A. Difference.***

❒ Only train the staff you want to keep

❒ Develop a consistent orientation program to foster a team mentality and continuity

❒ Set individual and practice goals

❒ Mandatory shadowing time (with doctor and staff)

❒ Assign mentor to help new staff learn

❒ Encourage note-taking

❒ Mandatory cross-training

❒ One-on-one hands-on instruction sessions.

❒ Standardized procedure manuals with photos for "how-to" clarification

❒ Explain how, when, and WHY to carry out procedures a certain way

❒ Use written job descriptions to identify, steer, and monitor task responsibilities

❒ Promote continuing education to assist in the learning process: seminar attendance, training programs, zoom videos, certification, publications, and articles

**Use written job descriptions to identify, steer, and monitor task responsibilities.**

❒ Review risk management and compliance rules including their accountability/OSHA/HIPAA

❒ Promote CPR certification

❒ Review accident and safety awareness and protocol

**7) Internal Processes and Standards of Operations**

❒ Consistent scheduling protocol

❒ Address potential (and identified) areas of efficiency breakdown

❒ Morning prep huddles (doctors and staff) to discuss upcoming schedule requirements, special patient needs, and staff responsibilities throughout the day

❒ Put embezzlement safeguards in place; inform staff of money handling obligations, routine audits, and unannounced spot checks

❒ Inform on how to handle patient callbacks

❒ Office policies (i.e., telephone, social media, attendance, safety, etc.)

**8) Eliminate Inconsistencies**

❒ Reduce varying treatment protocols within a multi-doctor practice that create confusion can negatively affect staff efficiency

❒ Eliminate discrepancies between what patients hear from doctor vs. from staff re: scheduling opportunities, payments, at-home instructions, etc.

❒ Uniform policy enforcement—Is it okay for some (patients/employees) and not okay for others?

**9) Patient Interaction and Communication**

❒ Listen to learn; let them talk. "What questions do you have that I can answer for you?"

❒ Make eye contact and call them by their name

❒ Make sure your words and facial expressions match (or they will only believe your face)

❒ Show empathy and compassion

❒ Avoid judgmental, insensitive comments

❒ Build trust and confidence—don't offer promises/results you know that you, the medication, or the intended procedure cannot keep.

❒ To assure patient compliance with at-home orders, use bullet point directives (rather than paragraphs) and have patient verbally repeat instructions back to you.

❒ Do not propose a "one size fits all" approach to treatment for every patient. Use set protocols as a guideline only, always taking individual patient needs, circumstances, and abilities into consideration.

❒ Take patient satisfaction surveys for optimum patient care

After you decide on which sections most need your attention, put it into a written Action Plan. Then, at your next meeting, divide up assignments and make everyone (including yourself) accountable for a task or two. At the following staff meeting (your indicated proposed deadline), call for outcomes and celebrate the progress made together. Repeat this process until the items in each additional section have been addressed and completed. If repeating a section is necessary, this is normal. Allow for the time it takes to put new policies into action.

Once all items have been successfully accepted as routine protocol, you'll want to congratulate your team for their combined efforts and maybe even offer them some kind of reward. Not sure what that reward might look like? Ask your staff for their thoughts. They'll be happy to offer some meaningful ideas. In fact, their suggestions might even surprise you. **PM**

**Ms. Lynn Homisak**, President of SOS Healthcare Management Solutions, carries a Certificate in Human Resource Studies from Cornell University School of Industry and Labor Relations. She is the 2010 recipient of *Podiatry Management's* Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the *PM* Hall of Fame. She is also an Editorial Advisor for *Podiatry Management Magazine* and is recognized nationwide as a speaker, writer, and expert in staff and human resource management.