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How to Work with a Practice Administrator

Physicians who form or join large group medical practices face many challenges, especially early in the experience. Some of these will be evident and expected. But the physician transitioning from a solo or small group practice to a large group may overlook one adjustment that will be imperative to make: working with a practice administrator for the first time.

If you find yourself in this situation, there are certain actions you can take that will help ease the transition for you. These include the following:

- **Expect change.** By expecting change, you can eliminate the exasperation that accompanies surprise. Expect your new situation to differ from solo or small-group practice in two essential ways.
 - *First*, your involvement in the daily business operations of the practice will be less -- perhaps far less -- than it was in your former practice.
 - *Second*, the way a physician interacts with an administrator differs from the way he or she interacts with an office manager.
- **Prepare for change.** ask about your new work environment; focusing on the duties of the administrator, his or her personality, and the particulars of interaction between physician and administrator, as they typically happen in your new practice. Talk with your:
 - *new associates* about their impressions;
 - *colleagues* in other practices who are in similar situations;
 - *administrator*, to get a first-hand impression of him or her.

It is best to gather this information before joining your new practice, preferably in a comfortable relaxed setting, rather than on the job, under pressure.

- **Effect change.** In your new practice, you probably will be devoting far less time to business matters and much more time to patient care. Essentially, you will be working with a new job description; changing your mindset to match your new situation will make the transition much easier for you.
- **Seek Assistance.** A number of organizations, including, for example, the Medical Group Practice Association, the American College of Physician Executives, and the AAFP offer educational resources that should be helpful. Attend courses, ask questions, and read all the pertinent material you can find.

The role of practice administrator

In a large-group environment, taking care of business is a full-time job for a trained and experienced professional who has a support staff. It is not a job for amateurs or part-timers, and it is just as unlikely that a full-time physician can find the time or demonstrate the business skills needed to administer a large practice, even in concert with other physicians.

The practice administrator needs an entirely different set of skills and, more importantly, an entirely different mindset than does the office manager of a solo or small group practice. He or she does not file insurance forms, sit at the front desk to fill in for the receptionist during lunch, interact much with the practice's patients, or make coffee for the doctors.

Further, an administrator needs no health care experience to manage a medical practice successfully, even brilliantly. In the new environment, business savvy, financial skills, and personnel management experience count for much more than tip-of-the-tongue familiarity with, for instance, billing and CPT codes. In many large practices, staff who report to the practice administrator will do most of this work, while the administrator works to control practice costs; scout out contracting opportunities; analyze outcomes, utilization, and other practice data; formulate, implement, and monitor a business plan; and manage personnel.

A practice administrator will probably assert more authority and challenge the practice's physicians more frequently than the office manager of a solo or small-group practice, who is likely to interact more frequently and intensively with you and your associates, taking direction and acting upon your recommendations.

Make the transition

One of the advantages of working with an administrator is that you will be able to pour all of your energies into patient care, while the business of your practice continues to function on a high level. However, you may find it unnerving to relinquish day-to-day control of practice business, especially at first. Remember that the practice administrator was hired to do things that you may not be trained to do. He or she has the training, time, and experience to analyze data, establish strategies, and implement policies.

As a partner in the practice, you will share responsibility for setting the practice's goals and establishing the parameters and guidelines under which the administrator functions. Your input into practice management decisions may be through the oversight committee and your direct input may be limited to voting at the group's annual meeting. Especially in terms of outcomes management, utilization, and other issues related to managed care, many physicians who settle into large group practices are able to rely on their administrators to tell them what they need and help them achieve it.

You should be able to relax and concentrate on practicing medicine and on learning how to work with the administrator. Make the most of your opportunity to spend more time practicing medicine

A version of this article was submitted for publication in Administrative Eyecare (Summer 2005 issue). It was reviewed and updated in 2006. Permission is hereby granted for the reprinting and use of this article provided that such distribution is free, and provided that the source and ownership of this material is acknowledged to be The Health Care Group, Inc.®. This article can be found online at www.healthcaregroup.com.