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Better together

How to build a successful integrated practice.

BY STEPHANIE HIGASHI, DC

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INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE PRACTICES THAT INCLUDE A WIDE VARIETY OF medical disciplines have been around a long time. What's new in healthcare today is a franchise model that incorporates medicine, chiropractic, acupuncture, nutrition, physical therapy, massage, and other disciplines in one location.

This framework provides a win-win scenario for healthcare providers and their patients. Within this model, doctors and other healthcare professionals work together to pool their financial and professional resources to better adapt to a constantly changing healthcare environment.

For their part, patients benefit and appreciate a more centralized approach to healthcare that minimizes the need to visit multiple offices for consultations, exams, and treatments. By capitalizing

on the diversity of provided services, entrepreneurs who convert a single chiropractic practice into an integrated medical services franchise are able to build a successful, coordinated, and convenient healthcare delivery practice.

Limitations of traditional practices

Chiropractors face several challenges due to restrictions and regulations of what they can and can't do. For example, in many states chiropractors are not able to prescribe or even advise patients on the use of medications. Also, because they typically treat neuro-musculoskeletal issues, chiropractors are often limited in their experience and knowledge about how to help patients with other common health concerns such as cardiovascular or intestinal diseases.

At the same time, chiropractors who offer only one service often experience

a low retention rate because patients often do not return after completing treatments. In addition, many are solo practitioners and are frequently overworked and understaffed. Not surprisingly, this stress can have a negative impact on the delivery of their services.

The solution for chiropractors is to pool their resources with other service providers and create integrated practices that offer patients a wide array of health and medical screenings and treatments—all under one roof.

Benefits of a franchise

Just as franchise businesses work well in foodservice, homecare, automotive, and other consumer service areas, a well-developed franchise model provides essential benefits that lead to sustained business growth and success of integrated practices. These include:

Conversion to a national brand, supported by best practices. This includes training, support and encompasses proven effective processes for operating and marketing a medical clinic.

Increased patient retention, recurring revenue, and repeat business. Offering multiple services to patients increases the frequency of their visits while deepening doctor-patient relationships.

Established national vendor partnerships for incremental cost savings. Typically, franchises reap the benefits of national vendor partnerships, providing increased regional, and national buying power not available to single medical practices.

Proven marketing programs including digital, social, and database advertising strategies. The corporate franchisor develops marketing programs that can

be tailored to the franchisee's local market to reach and retain patients.

Ongoing analytical business operations auditing. Through periodic analysis and training, a franchisor can identify problem areas and provide solutions that deliver the most profitable business practices for added revenue in each market.

Research and development of new services, products, and practices. Franchises can take advantage of proprietary best practices along with any new offerings developed by the corporate franchisor.

Secrets of success

The most effective integrated practices are those started and run by professionals who have a clear vision of the practice's mission and purpose. They determine why they want to start an

integrated practice as well as how to operate it, and then they put their ideas into motion. The primary goal in the delivery of services is to enhance patient care rather than focus on quick and easy financial gains. To accomplish these goals, incorporate best-practice concepts.

Seek out trusted advisors and consultants

Many chiropractors believe they can start an integrated practice without any outside help. They may not recognize or know about the different rules and regulations that need to be navigated. Advisors guide chiropractors away from common pitfalls, such as purchasing a large amount of new equipment or hiring too many full-time staff at the beginning when expenses outweigh income.

Advisors assist in finding experts and consultants such as accountants, insurance billing specialists, and

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healthcare and employment attorneys to protect them from potential legal, tax, and insurance nightmares. This type of support is an important feature of a franchise model because newly established practices will have the support of others who have blazed this trail before.

Find the right staff

When suitable doctors and staff work together, accomplishments are achieved more easily and with fewer headaches. No longer is a single practitioner solely responsible for diagnosing and treating his or her patients.

Instead, medical providers are able to confer with one another to determine the best course of action. They can cover for one another when someone is on vacation or ill, which decreases lost revenue due to canceling or rescheduling patients.

This type of practice also benefits from the ability to employ a team of office staff including front office, marketing, billing, and patient-care personnel, rather than relying on the doctor and one or two staff members to handle all these tasks. The result is a cohesive group of professionals providing the best patient care available, while increasing revenue sources by offering an array of services.

Understand the operational end of the business

It's crucial for chiropractors to know how to bill and code correctly. If they don't, it can lead to early financial insolvency.

That's because when integrated practices don't optimize service, billing, and coding, they won't be fully reimbursed for the services provided, and then overhead costs eat away at their profits. Eventually, expenses will be higher than revenue and this can lead to the closure of a practice.

Therefore, it is important to verify patients' insurance coverages and their specific benefits. But remember to

keep the focus on the patient and recommend care based on what they need and not on their defined healthcare benefits.

Provide medical continuity

Solo practitioners refer patients to other medical providers without knowing the outcome of these referrals until patients return to their offices. In effective integrated practices, even though providers work within their scope of practice, they can refer patients to the other specialties at their location and easily follow up with their partners to ascertain the outcomes. In this way, they are able to provide enhanced care and obtain effective results.

Recognize that an integrated model is highly regulated. If implemented correctly, it works well for patients, staff, providers, and owners. If implemented poorly, the ramifications can include time-consuming audits and costly penalties. This is where prudence pays off.

Can't we all just get along?

Unfortunately, many chiropractors still believe that the traditional medical profession is the opposite or even the enemy of chiropractic medicine. This perception is inaccurate. The two disciplines can (and should) put history aside and join forces to create a better future for themselves and the clientele they serve. When like-minded medical doctors, chiropractors, and other healthcare professionals work together to provide multiple specialties and services in one location, they are able to accomplish the ultimate goal of optimal health for their patients. **CE**



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