



# Prescriptions *Medical Alert*

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*Before beginning the recruitment process, consider the qualities of your ideal candidate.*

## Finding the Right Match When Recruiting a New Associate

Recruiting qualified young physicians can be a challenge for practices, especially for those with more limited resources and less desirable locations. If your practice is small, it may be difficult to compete directly with larger practices. Instead, emphasize the unique advantages of your practice, such as a friendly and flexible working environment, minimal stress, and the opportunity to get to know patients.

Before beginning the recruitment process, consider the qualities of your ideal candidate. Create a detailed description of what the position entails, including the various responsibilities of the new associate. Will he or she be taking over for another physician who is leaving, or is the practice expanding? Will the associate be required to handle a very busy schedule, or will a part-time schedule be a possibility? This detailed job description can also prove useful in crafting a job posting and formulating discussion points for job interviews.

When advertising the position, include general information about the practice and an explanation of how the new associate will be integrated into the organization. Where appropriate, provide details of the practice's payer mix and the new associate's earning potential. Offer an overview of your community, including information about the local real estate market, schools, shopping, dining, and recreational activities.

It is often assumed that most young physicians prefer to join practices in urban or suburban areas, where they may enjoy an array of cultural and social opportunities.

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## The Benefits of Barcoding

Monitoring supplies, medications, and patient specimens can be challenging in a busy practice. When important items go missing or essential supplies run out, a crisis can ensue. Yet, ordering large quantities of supplies in advance or asking staff to spend valuable time verifying inventory levels or locating test results hardly contributes to an efficient operation. Practices can make better use of their resources, while also ensuring that supplies and clinical information are available when needed, by adopting an automated data collection system that uses barcodes to identify and track all items that are vital to consistent operation.



Barcoding is no longer just for large organizations with big inventories. Technology providers now offer inventory control software packages designed for smaller practices that include stock-room inventory software, barcode scanners, and printers capable of producing secure barcode labels and ribbons. Some systems also include radio frequency identification (RFID) tags, which allow users to identify and track items remotely using radio waves. Implemented as part of an e-procurement, or online purchasing system, barcoding can simplify supply management, while reducing waste and improving cash flow by ensuring that supplies are ordered on an as-needed basis.

When items arrive from the supplier, barcode labels for each item can be printed out and affixed

to the items or to the shelves where they are stored. As supplies are needed, individual clinicians or staff members can scan the barcodes with handheld computers when removing them from the shelves, linking them to codes that have been assigned to each patient chart. Scanning notifies the system that the item is in use and also provides information about the physician or staff member who has removed the item, as well as the patient for whom it is being used. Besides notifying the system when certain supplies are running low, the collected information can also be used for billing purposes and to effectively monitor details of supply consumption.

Ordering supplies through e-procurement is generally more efficient than assigning a staff member to physically track items. When supplies fall below a certain level, purchasing managers can be notified that it is time to reorder. The system may be programmed to seek out the lowest price currently available on the market or to automatically place an order with a designated supplier. This online purchasing may also reduce the need for expensive emergency deliveries when supplies run out unexpectedly.

In addition to tracking consumable items, such as medications and cotton swabs, inventory applications can also track fixed assets, such as medical equipment, office furniture, and computers. Barcode labels can be printed out and affixed to these items, making it easier to spot missing items and keep tabs on depreciation for tax purposes.

Barcodes can also be used to track clinical specimens, thereby reducing the chances that they will be lost or misidentified when sent to laboratories for testing. Portable thermal barcode printers can be used to print out specimen labels that can be affixed to vials, slides, blood bags, and petri dishes. These labels are designed to withstand exposure to liquids, cleaning agents, heat, and refrigeration.

Whether the system is used for office supplies, equipment, patient files, or clinical specimens, barcoding can be integrated into the billing and claims functions of practice management systems, making it easier to charge patients and insurers fairly and accurately, as well as improving the accountability and overall efficiency of medical practices. *P*

## Building Your Practice through Better Patient Communication

Marketing services to patients is not high on the list of skills physicians learn in medical school. Yet, as patients are encouraged to shop around for the doctor with whom they have the best rapport, patient relations has become a priority for many practices. If your practice is expanding or seeking to attract and retain certain patients, you may want to hone your communication skills.

Keep in mind that first impressions count. Even before they see the doctor, all patients should be greeted with friendly, first-rate service. The recep-

tion team should always be prompt and efficient when answering phones and interacting with patients. The waiting area should be comfortable and inviting, yet not overcrowded. When problems with billing and insurance arise, encourage staff to be respectful, always working with the patient to find an appropriate solution.

If possible, offer patients longer consultations, giving them a chance to discuss their concerns. If time runs short, arrange with the patient to continue

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However, it could be that these newly trained doctors have not been properly approached by practices in more remote areas.

For example, when a recent survey by recruiting firm LocumTenens.com asked physicians with no rural health care experience why they had never practiced in less populated parts of the country, 32% said they had never found the right rural medicine opportunity, 29% said they had never been offered a position in a rural area, 25% said they just never considered it, and 11% said they would only be interested in a particular rural area. Meanwhile, just 15% of the physicians surveyed said they do not want to live in the country, and only 6% said they do not want to work in rural areas.

So, if you are having trouble finding appropriate candidates because your practice is “off the beaten path,” improve your chances by casting your net as widely as possible. Begin advertising the position long before the need for a new physician becomes urgent. Place ads on physician recruitment websites or in professional journals where physicians who are completing their training are likely to be looking for positions. Besides posting ads, contact the coordinators of residency programs and notify them of your interest in hiring a new associate. If time allows, expand your networking capabilities by becoming involved in local residency programs or volunteering time to a nonprofit organization.

If your time is limited, or if you have very specific needs, consider working with a recruitment agency. A professional recruiter can help you reach a larger pool of potential candidates, while also performing other tasks, such as checking references and verifying credentials. While a professional recruiting agency may conduct preliminary interviews, a physician from your practice should speak to each candidate on the phone prior to requesting an interview.

During the interview, include a tour of the office and a brief introduction to physicians and staff. This will give the candidate a feel for the work environment, as well as the opportunity to ask questions about the daily operation of the practice. Be as honest as possible about what the candidate can expect should he or she decide to join your practice.

If you are still finding it difficult to attract qualified candidates, consider ways to make the position more attractive, while still meeting the needs of the practice. Options may include sign-on bonuses, loan forgiveness programs, or cash incentives. Many younger associates may also welcome the opportunity to work for a practice that offers flexible schedules or reduced work hours. Simply letting candidates know that you respect their need for balance in their professional and personal lives and are willing to make reasonable accommodations to achieve that balance can go a long way in finding the best new physician for your practice. *L*

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the discussion at a later visit, or by phone or e-mail. The patient should never have the impression that he or she is being rushed or dismissed.

As growing numbers of people use the Internet, practices should analyze their web presence. Consider creating an interactive website that allows patients to book appointments online. This is convenient for patients and can also reduce the amount of time staff spend on scheduling. Patients may also be encouraged to send clinical and administrative questions to the practice via e-mail. While you or your assistant may not have time to answer these queries in detail, perhaps you can respond by providing useful websites or links, or by inviting the patient to come in for a consultation. Patients who register on the practice website can also be sent appointment reminders, symptom management strategies, or news via e-mail.

To better serve patients with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes or hypertension, your practice may want to offer an educational disease management seminar. This can provide an oppor-



tunity for patients to become better acquainted with the physicians and staff, as well as serve as a reminder to patients of the ongoing need for preventive healthcare and regular monitoring of their conditions. Your ability to communicate well with your patients is key to building and maintaining your practice. *P*

## Physicians React to CDHPs

While increasing numbers of physicians feel ready to advise patients on the cost of office visits and procedures, many still do not understand how consumer-directed health plans (CDHPs) work, nor are they prepared to discuss the cost implications of certain courses of treatment, according to a study published in the October 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Managed Care*.

The study's findings are based on a survey of 528 primary care physicians, 40% of whom have CDHP enrollees in their practice. Among all the physicians surveyed, 43% reported low knowledge of CDHP cost sharing, and around one-third reported low knowledge of how medical savings accounts function. While the survey found that physicians with CDHP enrollees as patients had a better understanding of CDHPs, one-quarter of these respondents indicated they had low knowledge of CDHP cost sharing.

The survey also showed, however, that more than two-thirds of all the physicians surveyed are ready to advise patients on the cost of office visits, medications, and laboratory tests, and around half are prepared to discuss medical budgets and the cost of radiologic studies, specialist visits, and hospitalizations.

“To care appropriately for patients enrolled in CDHPs, primary care physicians may need a better understanding of cost sharing and of medical savings accounts,” the study's authors said. “Physicians and patients need greater access to the costs of specific services, and physicians need guidance with regard to their role in medical budgeting.” *P*