

Moving into a new role

Making the transition from resident to

practicing physician doesn't have to be an emotional ordeal. Proper planning and preparation for new responsibilities will ease your shift from training to practice.

BY BARRY CREASMAN
AND CALVIN BRUCE

For some young physicians, the thought of completing their residency and starting a full-time practice is a welcome relief. For others, the thought itself induces anxiety that mounts as their residency program nears completion.

Making the transition from physician-in-training to full-fledged practitioner need not cause undue mental or emotional stress. With the proper frame of mind and preparation, residents completing their training can confidently launch their new careers and enjoy the rewards of a successful practice.

Relocation made easy

One of the biggest challenges facing residents is making a major relocation move. Relocating is particularly difficult for someone who grew up and was educated and trained in one part of the country but must



move to a region much different in climate or culture. Along with adjusting to the cultural shock, the resident faces a major hurdle in making the physical move, building a clientele, and establishing good work relations with other physicians.

Dr. Julie Schopps, a pediatrician at Piedmont Health-Care in Statesville, North Carolina, recalls her experience:

"I attended medical school and trained in the same area at a tertiary care hospital. I had subspecialists at my fingertips and knew which surgeons were particularly good. When I relocated to a smaller area, I had to learn the ropes of another system and how to comfortably interact with another medical staff.

"Thank goodness my part-

ners were exceptionally helpful in making me feel comfortable and providing the assistance I needed to start my practice," she says.

Dr. John Castaneda is a family practitioner with Summit Medical Group in Covington, Kentucky. He has similar recollections: "The hardest part of transitioning was trying to grasp the 'flavor' of the community where I would be living and practicing in a short period of time. Luckily, I was able to handle the situation with minimal emotional stress."

In terms of the actual physical move, there are ways to make it more of a pleasant experience than a nightmare. Here are some pointers.

✓ **PLAN WELL IN ADVANCE.** If the hospital has a relocation specialist, take full advantage of that person's expertise in making the process as smooth as possible. She works with major van lines and will coordinate the details of the move to minimize any hassles or delays.

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“The key to successful relocation is proper planning,” says Carolyn Greene, a physician relocation specialist with Palmer North American in Atlanta.

“It’s never too early to start. As soon as you know where you are moving, you should get your estimates. This will help in scheduling your move and in negotiating the moving expenses,” she adds.

Try to negotiate the best relocation deal with the hospital—but be realistic. It’s one thing to get what you feel you deserve; it’s another thing to be perceived as being greedy by your future employer.

Smaller hospitals in remote areas might not be able to match the relocation packages offered by larger hospitals in major metropolitan areas. Consider trade-offs. For instance, a moderate relocation allowance might be matched with significant educational loan repayment as an inducement to sign on. Similarly, the hospital might be quite willing to cover the expenses of obtaining licensing in that state along with the fee for DEA certification.

A smaller hospital may not have an in-house relocation specialist. In that case, you’ll need to schedule your own move, with your new employer reimbursing appropriate expenses, of course. As you contact various van lines agents, you’ll need direct answers to several key questions.

1. Is the charge “guaranteed not to exceed” a specified amount?
2. What about insurance coverage and claims history?
3. Suppose inclement weather or other unforeseen circumstances delay the move. What’s the appropriate recourse?

It’s important to get at least three moving quotes. To make an informed buying decision, ask for customer references. The van lines agent should not hesitate to provide three or four current references.

If the person is reluctant to do so, that should raise red flags of caution in dealing with that company.

To make things easier, be sensitive to your relocation timetable and allow some leeway in case some unpredicted hindrance arises. If your new job starts on September 1, don’t schedule the move for August 29. Allow at least a full week to complete the move and get settled in before starting your new job.

“If you find you are moving in the summer, you should avoid the first and last weeks of the month, as this is the busiest time for moving,” Greene says.

In addition, your relocation schedule should allow enough time to secure the appropriate licensing, as well as to register change of address with the American Medical Association, certification boards, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), etc. To speed up this process, always keep handy certificates required for licensure so that these records and hard copies are readily available.

✓ **GETTING ESTABLISHED IN THE COMMUNITY.** The physician relations staff should provide a packet of information about the community. If not, you can request such from the local chamber of commerce. Also ask for “Newcomer Kits” from local banks. It’s important to have bank references from your former bank and establish credit worthiness as you set up your residence.

Also, inquire from relatives and friends the names of people they may know in your new hometown. The individuals referred can acquaint you with special social and cultural features of the community and otherwise help you to settle in comfortably as a new resident.

It’s beneficial to make contact with medical societies; professional, civic, and religious groups; and college and medical school alumni organizations. All of them eagerly welcome new doctors into the community.

Furthermore, they can assist you in professional networking, which is essential in practice development. Your success as a new practitioner in the community will depend not only on your clinical ability, but also on your skill in networking and in building a loyal patient base.

The mental adjustment

Making the physical relocation move is, for many, an important part of transitioning to full-time practice. Making appropriate mental adjustments after leaving residency is another challenge facing most young physicians.

✓ **NEW IDENTITY.** Perhaps the greatest mental adjustment relates to self-identity: advancing from classroom trainee to full-time medical staff provider. Many residents feel they are not really respected until they become full-fledged practitioners.

When that occurs, though, they may have to deal with major lifestyle issues. Instead of scraping by on limited earnings, they now enjoy a very comfortable income, with corresponding purchasing power. Furthermore, residents who accept positions in smaller rural communities often enjoy a “celebrity” status.

To keep things in perspective, it’s important to remember that the most important objective of any medical practice is contributing to the overall wellness of the community.

✓ **NEW EXPECTATIONS.** Another facet of mental re-adjustment relates to viewing yourself as revenue producer. Instead of being accountable to a chief resident and residency program director, you’re accountable to a department head, medical director, hospital administrator, and governing board. Peers and superiors will evaluate not only your clinical competence, but also your ability to contribute to revenue enhancement.

Whether you work for a for-profit or a not-for-profit institution, to some extent

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your value to the medical staff will be determined by the patient draw you establish and maintain. Health care is, after all, big business in America and with the move toward managed care, practitioners will be scrutinized more and more in terms of their contribution to the financial profitability of their medical group.

In establishing your practice, you will be judged on how efficiently and effectively you provide quality health-care service. For that reason, it's essential that early on you "prove your worth" to your practice group and fit in comfortably with their practice management style.

"I thought I had done my homework as far as the business aspects of running a practice are concerned," says Schopps. "Medical training doesn't teach the many ramifications of managed care—HMOs, PPOs—or hospital by-laws, staffing privileges, malpractice insurance, and the like. It's good to sit down with the practice administrator and get a good understanding of these matters."

Establishing good hospital relations
On any new job, it takes time to learn the intricacies concerning the policies, procedures, and people with whom you'll be working. In pragmatic terms, as a new practicing physician, it's essential that you quickly make a name for yourself as someone who is competent, cooperative, and supportive of hospital rules and regulations.

✓ **STAFF RELATIONS.** Obviously, you'll be working most closely with the medical staff. These include a wide array of professionals who are extremely knowledgeable in their specialties. You will need to establish credibility as someone to whom they can confidently refer their patients if you are a specialist. This doesn't happen overnight. Winning the trust of colleagues comes about when they observe your clinical skills, bedside manner, and enthusiastic assistance to

other practitioners.

In working comfortably with your colleagues, it's helpful to have good call coverage. Today's young physicians almost demand it. The days of being on call every night are long over. Most physicians beginning to practice feel it's important to have free time for outside interests away from the hospital and office. After all, quality of life is as important as earning a good income.

Developing good workplace relationships should include the administrative staff and medical tech personnel. It's wise to treat everyone respectfully and cordially in your daily interactions. You never know who will be asked to give their opinions about your personal attitude, demeanor, and professional conduct.

Castaneda offers a practical tip for developing favorable hospital relations. "Don't isolate yourself from anyone. In addition to attending medical staff and departmental meetings, it's good to 'hang out' in the physician lounge prior to and following making rounds to make yourself visible and accessible to hospital colleagues," he advises.

✓ **PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION.** The first six to 12 months are critical in building a favorable reputation at your new place of employment. All eyes will be on you. What associates, patients, and their families say about you will have significant bearing on your professional reputation, which you want to keep unblemished at all costs.

It's highly important to develop a reputation for providing quality health care every time you treat patients. Patients who receive expert, professional care tend to remain loyal to the physicians treating them, and they gladly refer others in need of such care.

Given the oversupply of physicians in many regions and specialties, developing and maintaining a strong patient base has become critical in practice management.

In fact, professional networking and patient referral development can make or break you, depending on your specialty.

Locum Tenens:
"Test drive" a practice

Many doctors finishing their residency find locum tenens (temporary) employment particularly beneficial as they begin their careers as full-time practitioners. They most often cite the following reasons for pursuing locums opportunities:

✓ **EXPLORE VARIOUS PRACTICE SETTINGS.** Accepting locums assignments enables you to work in different parts of the country and evaluate the community life before making any long-term employment commitments. You may discover that a particular part of the country is not as enjoyable as you had always thought, or you may find a region of the country that you never seriously considered to be appealing.

Locums assignments vary in length from one day to a year and involve different work settings: solo practices, multi-specialty groups, clinics, rural hospitals, or large university research hospitals. In working numerous locum tenens situations, you will become acquainted with various practice management philosophies and styles of operation.

By "test driving" a given practice, you know in advance how comfortable you would be working there permanently. In many instances, providing lengthy temporary coverage can lead to a permanent contract. When that occurs, all parties have the added reassurance that the odds favor a successful match of personalities and clinical skills.

✓ **INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS.** Every locum tenens assignment includes a different mix of providers and patients. As you work along side experts at various practice sites, you increase your knowledge of medical procedures and protocols and sharpen your clinical

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skills. Furthermore, treating patients from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds is a valuable learning experience and helps develop a well-rounded bedside manner.

✓ **PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING.** Another benefit of locum tenens employment is broadening your professional contacts. Supervising physicians and administrators remember locums providers who offer high-quality medical care. They are sought after for future locums assignments and considered for full-time staff positions.

As your career progresses, professional networking comes in handy in other ways. It's certainly an honor to serve on medical society committees and boards and to be included in research and publication projects.

Working locums assignments at prestigious institutions helps to put one's name before industry experts who are influential in such matters. It also gives one the opportunity to meet and work with physicians who might be eager to hire or be able to recommend you for another opportunity.

A final word

Making the transition from resident to practicing physician doesn't need to be a nightmare. With foresight and careful planning, it can be a smooth affair. As you establish yourself in the community and in your practice, you will experience the personal and professional satisfaction that your training has prepared you to enjoy. ■

Barry Creasman is a physician development specialist with Jackson & Coker in Atlanta.

Calvin Bruce is the government contracts coordinator with Jackson & Coker and is also a free-lance writer.