



## marketing minute

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**Go for the Old** The senior members of your patient panel may be the seeds of a great niche for your practice. Expand on what you know about their care to stand out as a top physician for aging patients.

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BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



One of the best ways to expand your practice is to market your services to a specific group of potential patients. This could be athletes if you want to treat sports injuries, or women if you like to treat pelvic pain and other female specific conditions, or a variety of other specific patient populations. I suspect you have a large patient group that is already a part of your practice which could grow considerably given the right strategies—seniors. They are the fastest growing and neediest group of patients in the health-care sector. Of course if you strictly practice within the realm of cap-

itation, this might not be a profitable group for you to target. But most doctors who treat adults (regardless of their specialty), already have a well-established and potentially lucrative base of over-55 patients that could easily be expanded with some thoughtful planning.

One reason to consider choosing to target this patient group is that caring for these individuals likely is something you already know a lot about. In the business world, this is a

very standard principle called “marketing what you do best.” For example, there was a time when the Quaker Oats Company was dominant in the food business. Then they began selling toys to restaurants and they lost much of their market share. The moral of this story is that you don’t want to grow your practice at the expense of what you already have.

The other reason seniors are a good target is that this segment of the population is growing,

and because their health-care needs will be increasing as they age, these people need services that will coordinate their care.

So, consider expanding your existing patient base by providing more and better senior services. This is really a two-step process. The first step is developing an array of medical services that will be attractive to seniors. The second step is informing people about these services.

### Offer vital services

Dr. Ken Minaker, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and the chief of the Geriatric Medicine Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital, says there are three important ways that physicians can attract

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more seniors into their practices: 1) provide a continuum of care, 2) provide services that help them plan for future needs, and 3) focus on health maintenance as well as disease management.

In order to provide a continuum of care, you will need to be part of a multispecialty group or have an extensive network of referral physicians who can assist your patients in areas where you don't provide services. For example if your patient has a urologic problem you will want to be sure that he is referred to a competent urologist who will provide important feedback to you. Another example would be if your patient had a stroke and needed inpatient rehabilitation. In this case you wouldn't necessarily have to be the attending physician overseeing the rehabilitation, but ideally you would be able to direct the patient (and her family) to a competent doctor and a state-of-the-art facility. This seems obvious, but remember that one of the biggest complaints of patients across the board is that their medical care is fragmented. For seniors, who require the intervention of multiple specialists, this can be one of the most frustrating parts of the health-care system. Doctors can stand out by making it a point to help aging patients find the care they need and see that those caring for them communicate with one another and with you.

Many doctors now use physician extenders to help provide this continuum of care. Nurse practitioners and physician assistants can provide many services in your office freeing you up to take care of more complicated or urgent matters. Your office staff can be trained to contact elderly patients at home to monitor blood sugar levels if they are diabetic or their weight if they have congestive heart failure. Although these are just examples, it is this continuum of care concept that elderly patients will appreciate.

As you set up your network of providers

who will assist you in the care of your senior patients, consider the not-so-common but extraordinarily useful recommendations you can make. For example, in our office, we have information on service dogs for patients who have hearing or vision loss or who are orthopaedically challenged. We give patients catalogs of devices for common safety modifications for their homes (e.g., raised toilet seats, tub benches, grab bars, etc.). We also have forms available for anyone who needs to apply for a handicapped parking plate or placard. These sorts of services and information can distinguish and enhance the care you deliver to your aging patients.

Along with providing a continuum of care, Minaker suggests providing services that help seniors plan for the future. For example, they need to understand different insurance options, end-of-life choices, and what to do in case of a serious injury or illness. You might suggest that frail elderly patients wear some type of device that will alert the emergency medical services in their community if they are unable to reach a phone or to speak. Of course, physicians should not be providing advice on legal issues during a routine physical examination. But helping elderly patients recognize some of the issues that they may soon be facing adds a depth to the services that you provide—and to the notion that you care about the patient's long-term wellbeing, not just today's illness. Many professional organizations, such as the American Medical Association, can provide you with information on these issues.

The third way that physicians can provide valuable services for seniors is to focus on issues related to both normal aging and disease management. For instance, with aging comes a host of medical issues. These include arthritis, constipation, visual changes, hearing loss, tremors, forgetfulness, sleep irregularities, skin changes, and issues relating to taste and smell. Although

everyone experiences changes associated with aging, these alterations can be bothersome and medical intervention and a little education can do a lot to help with the symptoms. But many patients won't even ask for help because they just assume it is "old age." You can get things moving by bringing up the subject with them.

### **Let them know about it**

Whether the issues are age related or disease related, the second part of the marketing strategy for seniors is to let people know about your excellent services. Structuring your practice to take care of most or all of your senior patients' needs will create a lot of positive word-of-mouth marketing. You also can do more formal marketing by speaking to community groups, notifying colleagues of your comprehensive services and referral capabilities, and creating brochures that describe your services.

Many ready-made brochures are available for a small fee from professional organizations and you can put a sticker with your name and address on the back page. There are a host of valuable educational materials which are provided by charitable organizations, often for free (e.g., American Heart Association, National Stroke Association, American Diabetes Association, National Osteoporosis Foundation, etc.). You can display these in your office or give them out when you give talks. Patients often will pick up a brochure for a spouse or a friend and if your address label is on the back, this will get your name in the hands and minds of still more potential new patients. You can also create your own one-page information sheets with headings such as "Preventing Falls in the Home," "Keeping Diabetic Feet Healthy," or "Facts About Heart Disease."

If you like to write, there may be an opportunity to write a guest column in a local newspaper on topics of interest to aging in-

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dividuals. Many communities have senior newspapers that encourage these types of submissions. Reprints of published columns make great waiting-room hand-outs and can be sent to prospective patients as a mailing. Any time you publish an article or column, it immediately raises the value of those printed words.

Marketing to seniors can greatly increase your patient base. Providing excellent medical care with a continuum of services, information about how to plan for the future, and wellness education as well as advice about disease management will provide your aging patients with valuable health services. Once you have these things in place, let the community know that your practice cares about the needs of seniors. ■

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