

Improving Patient Care with an In-Office Dispensing Program



Here's some advice on choosing
the right products for your patients.

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When treating patients in a typical podiatric office, there are generally a number of products that you may recommend to complement treatment. You can provide them a detailed list and send them off to the pharmacy. There, your patient is confronted with shelves of products that may or may not be exactly what you recommended. Your patient ends up with products that they consider to be "close enough" or, even worse, never make the trip to pick up the products. This causes the efficacy of your treatment plan to suffer.

How can we ensure that our patients receive the proper products that will properly serve as an adjunct to your treatment? The best answer is to provide these products to your patient at the office. Providing this service is not only a convenience for your patients, but allows you to control the products being dispensed and used.

Considerations with In-Office Dispensing

There are a number of considerations when beginning to dispense products from your office. It is important to recognize that each new product introduced into your office will require sufficient introduction and training for your staff.

Another question that often arises is the subject of collecting sales tax.

the return so you can update your chart. If a product does not carry such a guarantee, a good policy is to simply accept the return and refund the money. In our offices, we even allow the patient to keep the product unless it is faulty.

Finally the question: what are the best products to carry in your office? The good news is that every podiatry conference has an exhibit hall to pro-

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This is not a question that can be uniform. Sales tax is dictated by state law and you should contact your accountant or attorney for the correct answer for your practice.

What if a patient returns a product? Returns are rare, but it is important to have a policy in place for them. Some companies provide a money-back guarantee that circumvents the physician's office. The patient calls the company directly, tells where the product was purchased and the price paid, and the company refunds the money, no questions asked. The company will often contact your office to let you know about

vide you with a vast selection of products to choose from and companies to work with. Collect samples and try them yourself, provide them to family, friends, and trusted patients to see which ones best meet your needs.

As for categories of products, there are a multitude of options. A good place to start is with creams and lotions. Various skin types require different products, so don't look for a one-fits-all selection. Anti-fungal creams, nail therapies, and shoe treatments are another popular selection. Pain relief, neuropathy-re-

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lated products, medical-grade insoles, sandals, shoes...the choices are limited only by your desire to integrate these items into your office.

Don't Think of It as Selling

Some physicians are wary about selling products to their patients. Dispensing products from a medical office is nothing new. After all, for years podiatrists have dispensed durable medical equipment such as fracture walkers, night splints, and ankle braces to patients instead of sending them to a medical supply company with a prescription. While those products are often covered by insurance, the goal is no different for products that are not covered and require an out-of-pocket cash purchase.

Think about dermatology practices. These physicians have dispensed creams, lotions, and cleansers of varying sorts to their patients for years. This has progressed to ultrasonic scrub brushes and peels for home use. This is similarly true of cosmetic surgeons and a multitude of other specialties. Patients are going to them in search of healthy skin and beauty, and dermatologists are all too pleased to assist them with the best products.

This is no less true for the podiatric office. Patients are coming in search of a multitude of foot and ankle conditions, and podiatrists should be comfortable recommending and providing the products that will achieve that goal. The first way to effectively achieve this is to change your mind set. You are not selling your patient a product; you are dispensing one as part of your treatment protocol and plan.

Use Your Team!

When it comes to dispensing medical grade and "physician only" products, your staff plays a major role. Whether you are new to dispensing or are expanding your selection, it is first important to include your team in the process. When considering new or additional products, have samples sent to the office to be tried at home by doctors and staff members. By trying the products per-

sonally or on family members, both you and your team will be able to confidently relate to your patients just how well they work. Personal testimonials not only give credibility to the quality and effectiveness of the product, they also allow a much stronger connection between you and your patients. It has been proven, time and time again, that our own personal favorite products move much faster than those we haven't tried. Think about the analogy of dining at an upscale steakhouse and asking, "How is the prime rib?" to which the server replies, "I think it's good, people get it all the time, but I wouldn't know because I'm a vegetarian." How inclined would you be to order that prime rib? The answer

paying out-of-pocket for recommended products and services. A team can be your best advocate or your worst enemy when it comes to the trust level and compliance of your patients.

Now that you have hand-selected the right products for your patients (with the help of your team, of course) and everyone understands the positive intention of offering and dispensing only the highest quality, medical grade formulas, move on to the third aspect of the program—education. Once the products have arrived and before you hang your slat wall or display cabinet, or whichever method of offering you choose, hold a team training session and make it fun! Set aside a half morning and

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is not very, and the same principle applies to all of the products and services you offer in your practice.

It is important to explain to your team why you are dispensing products from the office. Doing so will debunk the idea that you are dispensing solely to increase revenue. If your team feels as if you would sell anything to a patient to make some extra money, your dispensing program is destined for failure. While increased revenue is a common side-effect of a well-developed and effective dispensing program, it is not, nor should ever be the main focus or intention. It is very important for your team to understand the value of offering top quality, highly specialized products to your patients in the convenience of the office, at the time of their visit, and at affordable prices. It is also essential that your team believes in the products you have chosen and is able to pass this belief along to your patients every day. Patients often look to team members for advice (most times without the doctor being aware), especially when it comes to

pick up some coffee and bagels or extend a lunch break and order in pizza. Gather all of the dispensing products that you have selected as a team and form a circle of chairs around them.

Each product should be labeled with a number and a corresponding number should be placed in a hat. Each team member should select a number, match it to the product and get ready to present this product to the circle. They should keep in mind that the product is not being presented to their fellow team members, but to a patient who has no knowledge of the product or what it is indicated for. All involved should be encouraged to take notes throughout the process and ask questions if they are not comfortable explaining the appropriate use, application, or indication. Here we are learning together and working toward the goal of creating an entire team that is well-versed in the introduction and explanation of products for common patient conditions. We are not suggesting that

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team members make statements that suggest diagnosing a patient. We are simply educating them to the point of recognizing the commonly seen but often untreated conditions that present themselves every day. Doctors should also be actively involved in this training, as they will be responsible for the final recommendation or affirmation of the appropriate product or products during the course of treatment.

The final crucial part of creating a successful dispensing program with your team is scripting. Once your team is confident with the products you have chosen and understands the indications for use, it is important for doctors to approve the ways in which team members introduce and explain the efficacies with patients. We never want to make false promises or state that a product will “cure” a condition. As we know, many conditions have no miracle cure but can be kept under control or improved significantly with the appropriate treatment. Team members must be trained to use verbiage that is easily understood by patients and is accurate in nature.

An example of what to say when dispensing a topical antifungal solution would be: “Mrs. Jones, the doctor would like you to use this solution twice daily, beginning at the base of your nail and brushing up towards the end. It is important to treat at the base of the nail (using a visual cue with her fingernails) as this is where the infection begins. Now, it is important to remember that toenails grow at half the rate of fingernails, so you have to be patient during the course of this treatment. You will continue to use the solution daily and return to the office periodically for the doctor to thin the nails with his special instruments and monitor your progress. So many of our patients have seen great improvement with this product, and I’m sure that with a little time and patience, you will too.” I will leave the solution at the front desk for you to pick up during check out.” This type of scripting clearly demonstrates the team mem-

ber’s knowledge of the said product and the ability to effectively communicate appropriate use, while setting reasonable expectations for the patient.

The key to establishing and managing a successful dispensing program is creating a team effort that invites natural growth and expansion. Every individual in your

browsed by your patients and accessed by your whole team.

Many offices do not have the space for a dispensing center. In those cases, using an acrylic display case serves the purpose quite well. These are available to be custom built to suit your need in each treatment room. Again, this allows you and your team convenient access to

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practice plays an integral role in introducing, explaining, and dispensing high volumes of products to your patients. By selecting products that you and your team believe in and are proud to offer, you are providing a service and convenience that increases patient satisfaction, positive outcome, and yes, practice revenue. So, include the entire team in your dispensing program, listen to their suggestions for change and improvement, and don’t be afraid to reward them for a job well done. Your team and your patients will thank you.

Let Everyone Know

There are some who start a dispensing program and find that their patients do not respond. This may happen. It is possible that the product was not as you initially believed it to be and is not a good fit for your practice. It happens. More often than not, however, a product not being dispensed in adequate volume is because it is hidden. The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” definitely applies in this situation. The products should not be in the back office cabinets. They should be in view of your patients, staff, and you.

Some practices have set up a “dispensing center” in the office. This can be a connected office space, an area of the reception room, or a lesser-used treatment room. Here you can display your dispensing products in one area. It sets up a retail section of the office which can easily be

the products when the patient is being educated on your treatment plan.

You also should market your dispensing products. In the office, you can use brochures and reasonable signage to let patients know about the availability of certain products and services. Consider highlighting a “Product of the Month” in your practice newsletter. Also, include products available in your office on your website.

Be Authentic

Which are the right products to have in your practice for dispensing? The ones that YOU feel are the best and believe that they will allow your patients’ issues to improve as quickly as possible. One thing is clear: if you are recommending a product that you do not believe in, that will show in your patient presentation and you will not come across as authentic.

Patients will gauge your authenticity and make their decisions based on that. If they feel that you do not believe in your recommendation, they will not believe in you. This hurts the trust that is so crucial in the doctor-patient relationship. You should never allow a product to be used in the office until you have vetted it to ensure it meets your needs. The goal is not the volume of products in the office, but the quality of the products that you carry and how effective they are for your patients.

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Do you have medical devices that are sitting in the corner of your office and are rarely used? In speaking with physicians around the country, there are thousands of dollars of equipment languishing in disuse be-

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cause the doctor once thought these products would create a financial windfall. The problem is they never believed them to be effective. Therefore, they were never included in practice protocols, staff was never trained on them, and after a short period of use, they were out to pasture. Maybe you have one of these vascular testing units, physical medicine modalities, therapeutic lasers, 3-D scanners, or other devices in your office. Think about why they are there and learn from that reason.

You know you have the right product when you can

look your patient in the eye and explain why using it will help the patient get better faster. When you can use definitive language like "It is essential to use this twice a day to have the best improvement," then there is no selling involved. Your patient has come to you for your expertise and recommendation, and that is what you are providing.

Just Get Started

Whether you are ready to dispense your first product in the office or already have a dispensing program running in your office that you would like to expand, the best place to find out which products may be best for you is to consult with your colleagues. You can ask what has worked best for them and if they recommend certain companies to work with.

Listen to your gut. At the end of the day, it is your practice that will be impacted. Properly implementing a dispensing program, however, will help your patients improve quicker, provide a convenience to them by not having to get the products elsewhere, and will have a positive impact on your bottom line. **PM**

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