

## Camaraderie, creativity helps all-woman private practice thrive

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Private physician practices have been financially slammed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, women physicians have often found themselves shouldering increased family obligations as many children and senior parents left day-care centers and nursing homes.

So how has an all-female private physician practice fared?

AMA member Sumi Sexton, MD, and six other women doctors, along with a woman physician assistant, have innovated to maintain their family medicine practice, balancing life and work amid the pandemic's strains with each other's help and support.



“We have been very fortunate, and receive a lot of emotional support,” said Dr. Sexton. “We have

positive role models and by working together, we have been able to support each other and achieve a large measure of work-life balance.”

Understanding each other’s personal experiences, the physicians have been able to support their careers as partners, sharing practice management and patient care responsibilities.

Dr. Sexton and her colleagues are owners of Premier Primary Care Physicians in Arlington, Virginia, which is a member of Privia Health—an AMA Health System member. She is also the editor-in-chief of *American Family Physician*, wrote a parenting text (*Pacifiers Anonymous: How to Kick the Pacifier or Thumb Sucking Habit*), and is associate professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine. Her interests include adolescent medicine, newborn and infant care, and women’s health.

## Work-life balance and practice innovation

With the support of her colleagues, Dr. Sexton has been able to reduce her office participation to half time to help manage her various editorial and teaching duties while still allowing time to care for her patients and participate in managerial decisions.

“It was not my goal to go into private practice,” she said. “Both my parents were doctors. They came from India with a real strong work ethic, and I expected that when I became a doctor, it would have been an academic practice and be as a teacher. But I wanted to get a little more experience before I started teaching. “I saw some inefficiencies and management practices that didn’t support the best work environments and I wondered what we could do if we just ran a practice on our own.”

Every September, the AMA celebrates women physicians, residents and medical students during Women in Medicine Month. The pandemic posed another set of challenges for women physicians to surmount. That is why the AMA thanks the women physicians who are tirelessly advancing equity and building on change. This September, the AMA is recognizing the endurance and strength demonstrated by women in medicine through the challenges of the past year while being an advocate and ally.

## Coping with pandemic problems

The pandemic has been a huge challenge for most practices, she noted. Many patients across the nation have deferred regular appointments and Dr. Sexton’s practice has been no exception. But she and her colleagues found ways to counter the issue.

“The pandemic was a huge disruption, but we responded with experimentation,” she said. “We made

more use of telehealth and virtual visits and moved COVID testing and sometimes quick exams into the parking lot to keep people out of the office.

“It took a lot of coordination and patience to handle the decreased volume, but we kept the practice solvent and maintained our standard of care during the rough times,” she said. “In many ways, we have been able to reenergize the workplace.”

It takes astute clinical judgement, effective collaboration with colleagues, and innovative problem-solving to succeed in an independent setting that is often fluid, and the AMA offers the resources and support physicians need to both start and sustain success in private practice.

Find out more about the AMA Private Practice Physicians Section, which seeks to preserve the freedom, independence and integrity of private practice.

## **Private practice has a critical role**

The experience leads Dr. Sexton to believe that private practice will play a critical role in the future. Many physicians have been worn down by the pandemic and are seeking a new model. She said that concierge medicine—aka “direct care”—is one model that has some appeal, but private practice offers many advantages too.

“Young physicians just out of residency are deciding how they want their future—in a hospital system or in private practice. There’s lots more flexibility and commitment built into private practice. You are not following an organizational plan recycled for you,” Dr. Sexton opined.

She said it is important for physicians and practice managers to develop innovative new models that can deliver convenience, such as open-access scheduling. Private practice is a model that supports that innovation and so far, her own practice reflects that model.

“But now we have to keep up,” she said.