Helping private practice physicians navigate business challenges

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Being a physician in private practice can mean a lot of work and employing a particular set of business and organizational skills that very few doctors learn much about in medical school or residency training.

That’s because life as private practice physician means running a small or medium-sized business, according to Marie Brown, MD, the AMA’s director of practice redesign. She also is a geriatric and internal medicine specialist at Rush University Medical Center.

Dr. Brown maintained a private practice for 25 years and said the advantages outweighed the disadvantages—and the extra work. Time and autonomy are just two of the advantages.

“I wanted to give to my patients whatever time was required. I wanted to make that decision. If somebody always needed 40 minutes because they had numerous problems or needed to share a tremendous amount of personal information or challenges with social determinants of health, I could tell my staff to schedule them for 40 minutes or an hour,” Dr. Brown said. “Knowing your patients and being able to tailor your schedule to their needs gave me great joy.”

Dr. Brown discussed the demands and advantage of private practice during an episode of “AMA Moving Medicine” and highlighted the helpful tips and advice in the new “AMA STEPS Forward® Private Practice Playbook.”

What drives patient satisfaction

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“That one-on-one relationship between the physician and the patient is ideally organized around what the physician and the patient need because they both want the same thing,” Dr. Brown said. “The No. 1 driver of physician satisfaction is being able to give great quality care. And that's what patients want. Patients want the undivided attention of their physician,” she explained.

However, other staff are also critical to the office experience.

“Who does the patient meet when they first enter your office? What is that experience like? Whether you call that a clerk or a receptionist or the scheduler, that is their first interaction. That's going to set the tone for the entire experience for the patient,” Dr. Brown noted.

“And what I discovered was that having that scheduler be on the same page as the physicians and the medical assistants and the nurses and the LPNs [licensed practical nurses]—and all working as a team with tremendous respect across the entire team—the patients feel that. They know that. And it's a much more seamless and wonderful experience for the patient.”

Knowing that there’s a face to the voice that answers your call. Knowing that the person they’re speaking with has the ear of the physician. Those are all important to a quality care experience, she added.

How does a physician new to private practice learn about all of the details that make private practice successful? Answers to these and many other questions are provided in the “AMA Private Practice Playbook” (PDF).

It takes astute clinical judgment as well as a commitment to collaboration and solving challenging problems to succeed in independent settings that are 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.

What you don’t learn in med school

“The playbook highlights what you need to know and if you don't know, how to find somebody who will help you--who will help build your business team,” she said.

The playbook also explores how to build your clinical team, the types of insurance you need, the kind of coding and vendors you need to understand in contemporary practice, she said. “It really is actionable, and it helps you understand what you need to do and helps you find out how to do it.”
“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.