

Incorporating Nonophthalmic Specialties Into Your Practice

A multidisciplinary medical center can offer a variety of services for a specific patient population.

BY ERIK L. MERTENS, MD, FEBOPHTH

I recently moved my practice from a small space (320 m²) to a much larger one (2,500 m²). It was apparent to me that a change was needed when my old examination rooms began to overflow with equipment and patient flow started to jam. My patients, surgeons, and staff were frustrated with the cramped quarters.

When I purchased the new space now called Medipolis, in Antwerp, Belgium, I initially thought that I would appropriate 600 m² for my ophthalmology practice and rent the remaining space. My vision for the new space evolved as I talked with colleagues and nonophthalmic doctors, and I decided to open a medical center. At first, I thought I would rent space to doctors from other medical fields. What would I gain from incorporating, for example, a gynecologist or an orthopedist into my practice, and what would he gain from me? The reality is that we would gain nothing from each other because we are not working together and our fields do not complement one another.

MULTIPRACTICE MEDICAL CENTER

Rather than create a medical center that houses unrelated medical fields, I decided to incorporate many services that are similar to ophthalmology and target similar patient populations. For example, dentists are similar to ophthalmologists in that they do not treat sick patients. Our patients may experience pain or discomfort, but they are generally not ill. Instead, they want a brighter smile or improved vision.

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Building on the theme of wellness and quality of life, I incorporated a dentist into my practice as well as an aesthetic department, which includes a plastic surgeon, an antiaging doctor, and a microsurgical hair implant clinic. The practice also has an optical shop, a pharmacy, an ambulatory surgery center, an anesthesiology center, and a hearing aid clinic. Patients with cataracts often also have hearing problems. Patients who come in for hair implants or a hearing aid may also be good candidates for refractive surgery.

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TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Create a business plan to set guidelines, determine the practice's needs, and identify future growth plans.
- A multipractice medical center is a cost-effective venture in that the separate practices can share personnel and administrative equipment.
- Multipractice centers offer convenience by providing services that are applicable to a specific patient population.

MAKING IT WORK

Managing a group practice is not only a financial and organizational challenge but also a diplomatic one. Fully benefitting from a group practice requires managing the expectations of the members of the practice. This just as important as the daily management of the services offered to clients. More people mean more opinions, ideas, and priorities. For the practice to be a true success, all partners must agree on the basic principles, guidelines, and strategy for the venture. Making clear and firm the terms of an employment agreement will help avoid conflicts, frustrations, or impasses with colleagues. However, this does not mean that your partners will not have input and opinions to share over time. To help manage their expectations, it is helpful to set up an executive committee that takes into account all points of view.

Once the group practice is financially strong, it is wise to hire a general manager to oversee all aspects of the business. This relieves the physicians from attending to nonmedical tasks and issues that compete for their time with patients. Group practices that choose not to work with a dedicated general manager can introduce frequent meetings where decisions are made as a group on case-by-case bases, or they can elect a managing partner to serve for a period of time or as part of a rotation scheme. (This latter scenario is not ideal because it requires a physician to manage his peers.)

GENERAL MANAGERS BRING EXPERTISE

The general manager oversees administrative tasks and the staff. He can organize the board and management meetings and guard, steer, and evaluate the established policies of the practice. He should also have expertise in finance, human resources, information and communication technologies, and even marketing.

There are significantly more challenges for the management team in a multipractice medical center than in a single-specialty practice. But creating the right governance model and setting up an efficient communication and consultation structure among the parties involved is key to success for any group practice. ■

Koen Faes is the General Manager of Medipolis, Antwerp, Belgium. He states that he has no financial interest in the material presented in this article. Mr. Faes may be reached at tel: +32 3 828 29 49; e-mail: k.faes@medipolis.be.



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With an in-house optical shop and pharmacy, our patients can fulfill a variety of needs at a single medical center in one visit. Additionally, the layout of our center provides patients with a comfortable, stress-free experience. We have four waiting rooms. When one is full, patients are guided into another waiting area where they can relax, enjoy comfortable seating, watch flatscreen TVs, access wireless Internet, or read magazines. In an effort to educate our patients, we display information in our waiting rooms about the services offered at Medipolis.

ADVANTAGES

A multidisciplinary center is a cost-effective venture. Our staff of one general manager, two office managers, four receptionists, and two patient coordinators is responsible for all of the medical departments. In other words, each medical department does not have to hire its own personnel. Similarly, telephones and other administrative equipment (eg, fax machines, copiers, computers) are shared.

Incorporating nonophthalmic specialties into your practice also creates an experience of convenience for your patients. It is common that a patient who is visiting me will have a dentist appointment 50 minutes later. The patient can fill prescriptions and visit the optical shop on his way out. This kind of convenience and service creates a global experience for our patients; when they go home they feel that they were treated as a human being, not a number.

CONSIDERATIONS

Before starting such a project, it is important to create a business plan. Writing down guidelines for your practice focuses your mind so that you can determine the practice's needs and identify future growth plans. The key to success is to find other specialists who share similar mindsets and attitudes. Opening a multipractice medical center is a long-term commitment; if you are in constant conflict with your partners about organization, planning, or providing the best quality care to patients, you will find yourself in a problematic situation. In my experience, it is of utmost importance to hire a general manager to take care of all aspects of the business. ■

Erik L. Mertens, MD, FEBOPht, is Medical Director of Medipolis, Antwerp, Belgium, and Medical Director of FYEO Medical, Eersel, Netherlands. Dr. Mertens is the Chief Medical Editor of CRST Europe. He states that he has no financial interest in the material presented in this article. Dr. Mertens may be reached at tel: +32 3 828 29 49; e-mail: e.mertens@medipolis.be.

