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Retina Practice Efficiencies

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September 2014

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Referred Gain

Leverage these strategies to build and maintain your referral base.

By Joseph F. Jalkiewicz, Contributing Editor

With diabetic complications requiring retina treatment expected to grow over the coming decades, building and maintaining a strong referral base is key to getting your share of those patients, especially in light of growing competition brought about by new, value-based models of health care.

While focusing most of their referral-building attention on optometrists and general ophthalmologists, successful retina specialists are also reaching out to primary care, endocrinologists and other physicians with diabetic patient populations.

"As a retina specialist in a metropolitan area, our most important priority is our referring ophthalmologists," says Arthur D. Fu, MD, a partner with West Coast Retina Medical Group in San Francisco.

"Anything we do to reach out to local diabetologists and endocrinologists is always tempered by any preexisting relationships they might have with ophthalmologists who are already established in the area."

"Most of our diabetic referrals have been from optometrists, general ophthalmologists and PCPs," agrees Mathew MacCumber, MD, a member of Illinois Retina Associates in Chicago.

That's not to say retina specialists shouldn't conduct some direct and indirect outreach to these other specialists. As Dr. MacCumber points out, "It's important to keep the PCPs and endocrinologists in the loop regarding a diabetic patient's eye care. We send follow-up reports to them, at least once per year as required for the Physician Quality Reporting System."

Drs. Fu and MacCumber offer the following strategies for increasing your referrals from specialists.

Pick up the phone. Even in the age of Facebook, Instagram, texting and email, "it's still quite amazing that a simple phone call can do wonders," says Dr. Fu. Indeed, taking time for a "one-on-one conversation about complex patient cases assures other physicians on the care team that we're taking care of their patients well, and thinking of more than just the retina."

Network for success. It's no less true in eye care than it is in any other profession — networking works. Dr. Fu reaches out to introduce himself to the new ophthalmologists at a referring practice. "I also ask them to speak at resident lectures with me, operate with them, and call or text them often with details of shared patient care," he says. "I [also] don't hesitate to meet with them socially. I enjoy meeting their families. In that way, we develop a social relationship away from the office so they'll feel comfortable contacting me."

Hey, Teach! Offering workshops and courses on eye conditions that are likely to present in the offices of primary care and other specialists also helps to build referrals. "We have a yearly update course for ophthalmologists that a surprising number of internists also attend," Dr. Fu says. "They get to hear us speak and discuss treatments based on evidence-based medicine, and that strengthens our referrals."

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"We've discussed inviting endocrinologists to our CME programs and including at least one as a speaker," agrees Dr. MacCumber. "We did this a few years ago and attracted several endocrinologists as attendees."

Get back to basics: Deliver high-quality patient care. You can try these and other strategies to build referrals, but your efforts will bear little fruit if you don't practice the most basic of skills: Delivering solid patient care.

"The best way to get and maintain referrals is to be available and provide high-quality care," says Dr. MacCumber, stressing the importance of being responsive to patient needs, proactively asking them about their diabetic care (e.g., their most recent hemoglobin A1c results) at every visit, and sending referring physicians quality follow-up notes. Dr. Fu agreed, commenting that delivering good quality care ultimately makes it back to referring physicians via their patients.

"A good bedside manner with patients, allowing them time to speak, getting to know them, and educating them about the commitment required to keep their vision stable through excellent glycemic control, increases their respect for us, which 'gets back' to our referring physicians," he says.

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