'Physician' is a Broad Description for Many Roles

By Melissa Young, MD [5]

Physicians in private practice are healers, educators, and clinicians. But, they are also businessmen as well.

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In honor of Physician Practice's annual Great American Physician Survey, I thought I'd share my views of today's physician.

Traditionally, we are all healers, teachers, and scholars. As healers, we diagnose and treat and/or manage the disorders that affect our patients' bodies and minds. We are also called to be not just "disease-treaters," but health promoters. We must encourage healthy habits and discourage the bad ones. We also have the opportunity every day to teach our patients and their families about their illnesses, their medications, and their future health. In addition, as physicians, we are also often called upon to teach the community, medical students and residents, and our colleagues. As the science of medicine advances every day, it is our duty to stay up to date — especially with the information pertinent to the specialties we practice, but also, to a certain degree, with other practice areas.

In addition, the physician in private practice has the additional role of businessman. While it may not be true in big practices or for the employed physician, the physician/practice owner is also the human resources manager and finance manager. We interview, hire, and fire staff. We need to decide if additional employees are needed and what qualities are important to us. We need to keep an eye on the bottom line, too. Is the income generated enough to pay the bills? Can we cover salaries, utilities, insurance (malpractice, medical, property, etc.), supplies? We are also the marketing and public relations manager. Do we need to advertise? If so, how? And of course, you need to do your marketing plan, or at least approve one that you contract somebody else to create. If you also own your office, you are landlord, plumber, electrician, and handyman. Oh, sure, you hire somebody else to tackle the big jobs, but when that toilet gets stopped up, somebody has to plunge it, and you're not calling in a professional for that. And just the other day, I had to put my computer cart back together between patient visits. Sometimes, we are marriage or family counselors. I can't count how many times I have had husbands and wives or mothers and daughters yelling at each other in my exam rooms. The companion often snitching on the patient ("Do you know what he eats?"), or correcting the patient's answers ("You did not see the eye doctor two weeks ago, you saw him three weeks ago!"), or just answering the questions for him. I have had to gently tell my teenage or young adult patients (and sometimes frustrated older patients) that their parents (or children) just do it because they care. And last, but certainly not least, we are members of our families. We are spouses and children and parents. There are soccer games to watch, projects to help make, parent-teacher conferences to attend. There are doctor and dentist appointments to make. There are weddings and funerals and graduations to attend. My goodness, I'd just like to have one week of dinners at home with my family, preferably uninterrupted by phone calls.

Yes, the "Great American" physician wears many hats, and this is not an all-inclusive list. Each day is filled with new challenges. And med school did not prepare us for them all.

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