

Appreciation and Compassion in Times of Economic Turmoil

As 2008 comes to a close, there are some things that are certain. We will have a peaceful transition to a new president of the United States in January; our national economy is uncertain, uneven, and unpredictable; our national health care policy is about to undergo significant change, hopefully for the better; and the world remains a dangerous place for many of its citizens.

Looking back, 2008 has been a year of extremes. There have been extreme global temperature swings, extreme political rhetoric, extreme gasoline and fuel prices, extreme stress and strain of global resources, and extreme individual patience and tolerance.

For many, when there is uncertainty and unpredictability surrounding their lives, an attempt is made to find constants to rely on. People search for constants in family, friends, and faith. They seek consistency in their daily lives, from the daily grind of their morning commute to the joy of weekend relaxation. These patterns of predictability help keep spirits lifted and provide people with fortitude to keep moving forward in spite of all the adversity that seems to surround them.

Physicians and health care professionals are fortunate because they have a great deal of economic certainty to help guide and reassure them that all will eventually be well; however, this is not necessarily true of their patients, many of whom are on fixed incomes and depend on investment income acquired over a lifetime of work and savings. Patients may have income that is tied into real estate investments and other savings vehicles that have depreciated rapidly in just months or even weeks.

When physicians encounter these patients, the patients may have psychological fears and concerns that transcend their physical health, yet wreak as much havoc on their well-being as true physical ailments. It is important for physicians to remember their role in the context of the provider-patient relationship. A gentle hand and soft voice can mend many concerns and the physician's time with the patient can be one of reassurance, confidence, and a respite from the turmoil of external events.

It is equally important to remember the office staff, most of whom have fewer resources for education, income, and savings than physicians possess. The staff may have family members or other people dependant upon their earn-

ings. When the uncertainty of difficult economic times gives them stress, physicians can play a positive role. By keeping the lines of communication open and providing reasonable guidance and support, physicians can become role models and leaders. If the practice or clinic is having financial difficulty, consider openly communicating this in an educational manner. Explain that, like any household, there is a budget. If expenses exceed income, then belt-tightening is necessary. Ask for their help, ideas, and suggestions. Let them know that they play a valuable role in the daily success of the practice. Consider reminding the office staff that with hard work, good luck, and good fortune, the practice will survive and even flourish. Remind them that they not only play a vital role in the office, but that they will also enjoy solid employment with a successful practice.

Encourage everyone in the practice to value each patient, whether they come to the practice with a disease or a

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desire, as an important customer. Each patient provides an additional cog in the gears of economic success, regardless of their types of medical or cosmetic concerns.

Review the performance of different aspects of the practice with the financial team (eg, billing and payroll). Look for the areas that are performing well (eg, cancer surgery or phototherapy) and consider expanding those areas to take advantage of the demand and revenue. At the same time, examine areas that may be lagging (eg, medical spa or allergy-testing clinic) and seriously consider eliminating them.

With constraints on time and money, it only makes sense to maximize the value and return on areas of the practice that contribute the greatest portion to the bottom line. This is good defensive strategic planning.

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Consider developing an action plan for excellence in patient care and services, along with the careful monitoring of costs and supplies. Develop teams to look into specific areas of practice performance, especially with regard to customer service. At the start of each day, ask the teams to provide one specific instance where improvement could be attained as compared with an instance from the day before. Then, implement a plan for improvement for the current day.

Over time, the practice will enjoy growth and success. As the inevitable economic recovery arrives, the hard work and commitment to patient service and quality of care will be rewarded with compounded interest.

Finally, do not forget about yourself during these trying times. As the old adage goes, the first thing one should do during a code blue is take their own pulse. The important thing to remember is that we, as health care providers,

have worked hard all our lives to achieve success and if we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot take care of anyone else. This includes family, loved ones, the practice, employees, and patients.

I ask you, readers, to take a moment to survey the landscape of your practice and your patients. Are you happy? Are you fulfilled? Are you looking forward to tomorrow?

As we approach 2009, I wish each and every one of my colleagues a safe and secure holiday season and a farewell to a very difficult year. Take solace in the knowledge that we exist in a very coveted corner in the house of medicine, that we are richly rewarded for what we do, and that we do it very well indeed.

Wm. Philip Werschler, MD
Seattle, Washington

