



PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

No more revolving door

How to stop MOA turnover at your clinic's front desk

BY ABIGAIL CUKIER

Medical office assistant and receptionist turnover is a significant issue in healthcare. In fact, one U.S. poll revealed that 58% of medical practices identified staffing as their primary challenge. High turnover can be a major headache for physicians—it costs money, your schedule gets disrupted, patients wait longer and the remaining staff must pick up the slack.

So, what can a physician do to stop the revolving door of clinic administrative staff?

The Ontario Medical Association says improving staff retention starts when you hire them. Its guide, "Managing Your Medical Office Staff," says to establish and clearly communicate the conditions under which employees will be hired. "If the conditions do not match expectations,

and the job is not as described, you may lose candidates or staff and be forced to repeat the hiring process."

Job descriptions should accurately represent actual duties and responsibilities, as well as job specifications.

During the interview process, ask a consistent set of questions to each candidate to create a basis for comparison—and be sure to focus on cultural fit, not just technical skills.

"You want to find someone who is teachable," said Margy Yu, founder of Vancouver-based Clinic Core Essentials. "You also want someone who can handle being inundated with phone calls and email alerts and lineups. If not, they can come off to patients as annoyed, irritated or hostile. So it's important to look for those soft skills.

The front desk is such an integral part of the patient experience, she noted, that "you should invest the time to find the right candidate and communicate about the position."

Yu says equipping staff with adequate support and resources so they can do their jobs is a major piece in achieving retention. She knows what can happen when this is missing. While working at the front desk of a wellness clinic, Yu experienced poor management and overwork. This led to her leaving the clinic. When she became a manager at another clinic, she did not receive a lot of support and was left to figure out most tasks on her own. "The company kept growing without enough staff and since I was the most competent one there, they just kept rewarding me with more work," she said.

Yu left that position. “When I was ready to go back into the workforce, I felt sick to my stomach thinking about going to a similar environment. I just kept seeing different clinics with similar problems. I figured, if I worked in a string of clinics that had similar patterns, I’m sure that there are a lot of clinics that are also flying by the seat of their pants. ‘How can I remedy this?’”

Yu founded Clinic Core Essentials, which provides front-desk training, virtual assistants and receptionists and helps set up front desk operations for new clinics, primarily in the chiropractic, physiotherapy and wellness areas.

She says clinics should ensure processes are documented and not all in one employee’s head. “Once that person leaves, all the workflows and little nuances go right out the window and the remaining or new staff are left not being able to meet that standard and it ends up being this revolving door.” She advises clinic managers to create written standard operating procedures or document processes on video, so new hires can learn from them.

The OMA recommends developing a policy and procedure manual to train staff, ensure that the office runs efficiently and maintain productive and clear working relationships. Policies and procedures can cover topics including the length of a probationary period, work hours, absenteeism, code of conduct, dress code and how to complete specific tasks. The association also recommends training all staff to perform every task and to work with each physician, so staff can cover for each other.

The OMA also stresses that motivated and engaged employees are more likely to stay. They suggest communicating your goals and your staff’s role in achieving them. “With a clear understanding of how they contribute to the success of the practice, staff feel a greater sense of accomplishment,” the OMA HR handbook states.

It also recommends discussing important decisions in advance and holding regular staff meetings to keep everyone informed about developments in the office. “Encourage staff to express their views on processes, job satisfaction,

morale, etc. It is important for employees to feel that their opinions are welcome,” the guidebook reads.

And some of this feedback can help doctors learn about employee satisfaction. For example, through no-name surveys that ask questions like, “What annoys you about working here?” or “What keeps you here?” Doctors of BC says “stay

“You want someone who can handle being inundated with phone calls and email alerts and lineups.”

interviews” can help you understand how your team feels about the work environment and support retention. They are a conversation with individual employees aimed at understanding what makes them want to stay and what may cause them to leave.

Employees should receive regular feedback, including through formal reviews and day-to-day interactions, including praise for good performance and constructive criticism for areas that need improvement. Performance reviews can include setting goals for each employee to help them remain motivated

and feel they have opportunities for development.

If a staff member is underperforming, the OMA suggests first ensuring the job itself is not the problem and then trying to rectify the issue with the employee, which is much less costly than turnover. If termination is necessary, move quickly with input from a lawyer.

Rewards and incentives are a great motivator for employees. Salary is important, and the OMA recommends setting the pay scale to be in the top 25% for similar jobs. But other rewards are also important, such as flexible working conditions, team-building events, training or a chance for advancement and special projects. Tennessee-based Doctors Management suggests providing financial bonuses tied to staying at the job for certain periods or hitting certain goals, like reducing patient wait times.

Make their jobs easier

Providing tools to make the job easier can also help ensure employees want to stay. Consider new technologies like patient self-check-in, which eliminates a significant chunk of workload from your front desk. Supply easy-to-use software and AI tools.

Virtual assistants can also help, Yu says. They can handle tasks the front-office staff can’t get to due to other demands. This could include handling billing or entering new patients into the system. Virtual receptionists can handle overflow calls or assist with outgoing calls.

“Sometimes the front desk job or receptionist is such a thankless job,” Yu said. “But it’s such a huge part of the clinic. This team is just as important as anyone else who is hired and that deserves better recognition.” **MP**

VIRTUAL RECEPTIONIST SOLUTIONS

One strategy to help with medical receptionist and office assistant retention is easing their workload through off-site medical reception and assistant

staffing agencies, which are increasingly cropping up.

Companies like Toronto-based MD Agility and ClinicLine handle incoming calls, appointment scheduling, refilling prescriptions, emails, faxes, referral management, recalls and reminder calls. They work with a clinic’s

existing EMR and comply with all health privacy laws.

ClinicLine, which provides dedicated off-shore medical assistants full time, part time or hourly, says it saves clinics 30% to 40% in overhead costs from recruiting, hiring and training, replacing staff, and handling staff wages.