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TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS

“Your Guide to Not Only Survive, but *Thrive* in the Coming Healthcare Reform”



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Introduction

Change is coming. No one knows to what degree private medical practices are going to be altered by the growing tsunami of health care reform in the United States, but there is going to be a tremendous impact. How health care will be paid for, and how the limited medical resources will be allocated to individuals likely will be very different from the current US health care system.

This change will be more painful for some than others. Doctors who run smart and efficient medical practices will position their practices to succeed during the impending tumultuous change in the United States health care system. Those who don't may well close down or be absorbed by those who have properly prepared. Some people will just opt out of this new system and become consultants or cab drivers. The question is, what do you want for your practice after the changes to the US Healthcare system are implemented and the bugs are worked out?

Of course, this isn't the first time we have heard the call for major health care reform. But this time there is greater intensity in the demand for change. There is also a new administration that is backed by a Congress that predominantly supports the new administrations' agenda, making serious change very likely.

I encourage you to put your political opinions aside and face the future changes from a posture of one who is savvy enough to adapt to the changes, and thrive as a result. That is why this report was written, to help you position yourself and your practice to not only weather the changes that are coming, but thrive in spite of them.

Even if the current drumbeat for change dies down, and even if only token changes are made, the following keys to success will enable you to improve your operations, increase patient loyalty, and strengthen your business. So read with an open mind, and an eye towards what you can change in your practice to improve the delivery of patient care in ways that positively impact your patients' health, and your bottom line.

Delivery of Healthcare

Delivery of health care, even after the reform is implemented, will still require a doctor-patient relationship. No matter how the final reformed health care system is structured, patients will receive their best care from personal physicians dedicated to their individual needs and problems.

After the reform, insurance companies will likely make lower profits. Patients may have broader coverage but less access to the high-end benefits and procedures so easily obtained today. Physicians know that their income may drop if they continue to manage their practices as they do now. Specialists will be prevented from performing many procedures, and be paid less for the ones they do.

Primary care doctors may, in fact get an income boost but they will be asked to provide even more services to an ever-larger patient base to earn that extra income. They will have to become even more efficient to continue to deliver excellent care to more patients every day. Doctors will become managers of large teams of physician extenders while potentially still being held responsible for unfavorable outcomes. Excellent service and excellent systems will need to be instituted, enabling the most efficient use of physicians' time and expertise.

Physicians are already developing new practice models to provide excellent medical care to their patients. Physicians are an independent bunch, and many of them resent the intrusion of insurance and government in their medical decision making, or their right to earn a livelihood.

Boutique, or concierge practices, provide medical care to a group of patients who have paid a retainer fee for that doctor's expertise. The physicians limit their practice size and provide complete access to their patients, who can call or email them at any time. The care tends to be proactive, and provides greater convenience and access than patients typically have in a tradition medical practice.

In contrast to concierge medicine, another type of practice that is evolving is the "Direct Medical Home" model, or "direct primary care practice". These practices provide similar access to care as concierge practices but at lower prices and in lieu of insurance, not in addition to a patient's insurance. These practices can charge lower prices yet still provide great care to patients, and a reasonable income to providers, because so much of the normal overhead expenses in a private practice are due to processing insurance claims for patients. Their patients still need to purchase a low-premium, catastrophic insurance plan (e.g. a high deductible health plan) but their overall health care expenses are much lower, especially if they stay well.

It remains to be seen, in the coming US Health care reform, whether patients are going to have more choice or less. Most likely, those who can afford to buy their health insurance and health care are going to have more choices than the poor who cannot. Unfortunate as that fact may be for some people, I believe it is inevitable.

Because the reform will most likely remove barriers to care, by removing how much influence health insurance companies currently have on determining which physicians can provide care to their members, in many ways patients will have more choices in where they obtain their care. Physicians are going to have to respond to the new market forces to attract and keep patients,

probably by providing more and better services, but possibly also by lowering their fees. In either case, physicians are going to have to become more efficient and more service-oriented to survive. Many physicians will take the path of least resistance and join hospital clinics and other corporate medical institutions, but many will not. Private practice physicians, being adaptable and competitive, will change their practices to work within the new system, but I predict will survive and thrive. Their patients will benefit from their doctors' ability to innovate, streamline and provide them the most personal care.

The WOW Factor

To survive and thrive in the coming changes from the healthcare reform, private practices need to develop the "Wow" factor. That's "wow" as in a patient saying, "I didn't know that I could get such great care, feel so special, find such a great doctor, get such great service from such a busy practice" kind of wow! Private practice physicians need to make their practice a "Legendary Service Provider" on the order of Nordstrom's, or the Ritz-Carlton, to name a few examples. Your patients will become your raving fans, and tell everyone how wonderful you and your practice are. Legendary practices will survive any change and live to treat patients another day.

Patients are quickly learning to become informed consumers who have choices. They use the internet and rating services, in addition to recommendations from family and friends, to choose where to obtain their health care. Websites exist for patients sharing a particular disease to discuss treatment options, best hospitals and doctors, and support each other.

Employers and insurance companies often provide information about providers; along with data potential patients use to compare their options. Smart doctors and practices know about these information sources and position themselves to shine by comparison to their competition. Providing excellent service to your patients now is the best way to grow your practice into the future.

Committing to becoming a "Legendary Care Provider" means you are willing to objectively look at your current practice and make changes when problems are identified. *All changes must be made for the purpose of providing the best possible care and service possible for each of your patients.* It may sound obvious, but it can require difficult adjustments to current methods, and maybe investment in information systems, personnel, and other expenses. What follows is

Ten Keys to Success

Key #1: Define your practice's values and service philosophy. Share the vision with your team. Commit time and resources to create a process that enables your practice to consistently work within that vision and succeed at reaching the (new?) goals. It's about improving service to the patient and the ultimate goal: Top Notch Medical Care and Patient Service. You want your medical practice to earn the distinction of being a "Legendary Care Provider", to adapt the moniker to healthcare.

Smith and Hawken, the creative and innovative garden tool purveyor, has these instructions in its Employee Training Manual (substitute patient for customer, and practice for company, of course):

- Our goal is to have customer service that is not just the best, but legendary.
- You are the customer. If the customer is upset, you are upset. If the customer is satisfied, you are satisfied.
- In relations with customers, act as if you own the company.
- There is no such thing as taking too much time with a customer.
- The phone is mightier than the pen.
- If it doesn't feel right, make it right.
- A job isn't done until it is checked over.
- Do it once, and do it yourself.
- When in doubt, ask. When not in doubt, ask.
- A mistake is not a mistake. It is a chance to improve the company.

Key #2: Measure. Measure again. Rinse and Repeat. Do you know your practice's standing with your patients? Are you aware of your patients' top annoyance with your practice, something that is making them contemplate switching practices? What about your staff? How happy are they? How does your practice compare to your competition? Which staff member goes "above and beyond" for your patients consistently? That employee deserves recognition for adding deep value to your practice. Addressing patient's complaints promptly will not only lead to better care, but should help prevent lawsuits as well. Study after study has shown that patients

are less likely to sue a doctor for a mistake if they feel that their doctor has their best interest in mind, has responded to their concerns in the past, and is a good communicator.

Top hospitals and organizations measure patient satisfaction on a continual basis with surveys of all sorts: Paper survey before leaving the hospital, anonymous surveys mailed to patient's (and potential patient's) homes, phone surveys, polls on the practice's website home page. You would use a marketing research company (you can find one in every state) for the more involved surveys such as phone surveys, but you can get plenty of useful feedback and other information from just putting a suggestion box in your waiting room with some paper-based questionnaires beside it.

Key #3: Create a Service Plan of Action. Once you have identified your patients' (and staff's) concerns with your practice, changes need to be implemented. Review the survey results with your staff on a regular basis. Let your employees state their concerns as well. With your staff's input, develop a workable plan of action to address the identified problems, and to promote and build out the services your practice already does well. Keep it simple, and stress that the plan is an outline and that employees have your blessing to color outside the lines if a specific problem requires rule flexibility to be solved.

Key #4: Communicate Well. This action step applies to doctors, especially, both as health care providers to their patients, and also as the practice's owners and managers. Survey after survey has shown that the doctor's ability to communicate with his or her patient determines the patient's level of satisfaction. Not the doctor's medical school, not the doctor's ability to keep up with their office schedule, or how they dress or how the waiting room is decorated, but *how they speak to their patient is most important*. Doctors, as a group, could clearly benefit from some customer service training at Nordstrom's.

As practice owners and managers, physicians' actions speak louder than their words to their staff. In some practices and organizations, the management team declares it wants a certain kind of culture, but then institutes rules and procedures that result in a completely different one. You may proclaim that your practice's goal is to make patients the priority, but then punish an employee for creatively exceeding guidelines to solve a patient's dilemma. Suddenly the rules will look much more rigid to your staff, and your patients may be underserved by your practice as a result. Your staff will follow the rules and guidelines they're made to follow and the result may be a completely different work environment and culture than was verbally stated to be the goal.

Key #5: Heal the Broken Patient Relationships. A special process needs to be established to fix specific issues raised by your patients. In a busy practice, it is inevitable that some service lapse will occur. Perhaps the patient's phone call wasn't returned promptly, or a referral to a specialist did not get completed. You should have a designated person, or small team of staff, assigned to handle complaints that are going to involve more time or work, but the vast majority of problems can and should be handled by the staff member first aware of the patient's complaint. That concept will be expanded upon in the next section.

If a practice is large enough, and has the resources, designating a "Patient Advocate" for patients will be a huge "value added" service and set your practice heads above other practices. Not every patient will need an Advocate, but for those complicated patients with multiple problems, seeing multiple specialists, and who may need regular monitoring of lab results such as blood sugars or INR's, assigning a staff member (usually a nurse or medical assistant) as their Advocate will maximize the quality of their care.

Patient Advocates can:

- Serve as the patient's point-of-access into a large practice
- Spend more time listening to the patient to understand their needs and requests, and provide a positive care experience for that patient
- Help arrange for transportation and translators
- Keep the patient informed about delays in obtaining lab results, speaking with the doctor, getting insurance approval for a procedure, and so on.
- Use their knowledge to help the patient navigate the complicated health care system
- Represent the practice's level of care and concern for their patients

Patient advocates serve as a buffer for the doctors too. A synopsis of the patient's status can be organized by the advocate and presented to the doctor once per day, or per week, instead of in dribs and drabs. Think of it like getting a daily email digest of a discussion, rather than a new email for each comment made on a message board. Urgent issues can be handled, or a plan initiated, by the advocate, before the doctor would be available to respond. Hotels have the concierge desk. Excellent practices have patient Advocates.

Key #6: Make it Personal. Patient care is a very personal service, to state the obvious. Your relationship with your patient is unique. They share with you their secrets and worries that they may tell no one else. Doctors consistently rank very high on the personal trust scale (just below nurses, usually!) and that fact gives us great responsibility to our patient. Providing excellent medical care means providing excellent personal service to our patient. Like any relationship, little actions and our words can make a huge impact on the doctor-patient bond. Your patients are coming to see you, to request your advice. The overall practice is secondary - important, but secondary to the relationship they have with you.

To provide the best service to your patients, you should be sure to remember important days in their life, such as their birthday at least. Send them a card. You can delegate this task to your staff, but set up a system to identify which of your patients has a birthday that month and mail them a card (or call them). Keep track of their personal details like their children, their accomplishments, where they recently vacationed, and mention these when you next see the patient. A simple index card in the front of the chart works, or comments in the notes/miscellaneous section of the electronic medical record. Your patient will be very impressed, I assure you.

Don't forget to thank your patients who refer new patients to you. Your intake form should ask how a new patient heard about your practice, and then call or send a thank you note to your patient making the new patient referral (and make a note on that index card mentioned above.)

For specialists, your referring doctors are also an important relationship to nurture and acknowledge. Be sure to send thanks to them, not only with the consultation report you send back to them about their patient, but also separately once or twice per year. A gift basket of fruit or goodies to the consultant's office at the holidays, with a little note of thanks from you, goes a long way in showing your appreciation for their referrals. If you really want to stand out, send it around that traditional day of thanks, Thanksgiving. It's a non-secular holiday and most likely your thoughtfulness will stand out as the only consultant sending a gift of thanks at that time, unlike the end of the year when everyone else thinks to do the same. A cardiologist I know sends his gift of thanks to his referring doctors every Valentine's Day, the "official cardiologist's holiday" (or so he says).

Key #7: Empower your Staff. Your practice is not just you and your doctor colleagues. Every member of your team represents your practice every time they interact with a patient. To the patient, every staff member is a health care provider in some way. How they handle, or don't handle, a patient's concern reflects directly upon you and the practice. Your employee needs to know that they have the power to make the right decision and you, as their boss, will back them

up. Your staff will instinctively respond correctly if they've been made to feel that this practice is their practice. They take ownership because they think of themselves as an owner of this practice.

Many opportunities arise each day that showcase the quality of the practice's quality of service. Most of these moments arise suddenly, unpredictably, and without the knowledge of the physician owners. That is the moment that establishes your patient's perception of your practice. To ensure consistently high levels of patient satisfaction, you must empower your staff at all levels to think like owners.

Key #8: Ensure Continuous Improvement.

Encourage everyone on your staff to identify small, easily achievable, process improvements in their daily work. Be excited as the leader. Get your staff excited about the benefits of improved service. Overall service and satisfaction (patients, staff, etc) with attention to detail, and there are literally thousands of actions doctors and their staff repeat because of how they first learned it, or because minimal thought was given to the task. Change for the sake of better service should be presented enthusiastically, and with a bit of trial-and-error attitude. Mistakes during this process cannot be punished harshly. Improvement should be analyzed on the basis of quality produced, timeliness, cost-reduction, problem anticipation and creative problem solving, and improved overall productivity of a staff member, doctor, process or department.

Key #9: Reward Excellent Service. Spotlighting excellent service delivered by your staff clearly promotes your message to all that quality "customer care" to your patients is a top priority in your practice. Your employees will appreciate that you notice their efforts and value high-value work and they will strive to continue to earn recognition. Rewarding your employees regularly and consistently will do more to improve quality care than just increasing staff salaries, or even giving financial bonuses at year end. (One caveat, based on personal experience: be sure that each employee gets rewarded at some point in the year, so everyone realizes they are valued and no one feels slighted or unappreciated.)

Rewards don't have to be a big expense to your practice to be effective. Just sending around an email to all the staff when a patient writes to praise one or more employees can be effective. Schedule a monthly office pizza party lunch for all staff with birthdays that month, complete with a decorated cake from the local bakery. Have a designated parking space or a paid "Day Off" for the "Employee of the Month", if your practice is large and establishes a more formal employee recognition program. Every practice, no matter the size of the practice, should have

one or more “Employee Appreciation” lunches, dinners, or retreats each year to reiterate how much your practice values their commitment and efforts.

Key #10: The Core Guiding Principle: Patients Come First. Of course the point of delivering excellent service is to do right by the patient. Your practice can create the systems, test with repeated surveys, hire a patient care representative, and make the service delivery process complicated, but simple attention to the basic rule of “Do what is best for the patient” is the core guiding principle. Simply asking that question at each step of a patient’s care will lead to the best results. Then your excellent staff, whom you trust implicitly, and to whom you’ve given freedom to take ownership for each problem, will usually do the right thing for your patient. That’s not to say that there shouldn’t be guidelines and procedures, taught to your employees in training (which should be on-going), but give the staff some leeway. Rules are meant to be broken anyway, in most cases.

NEXT STEPS

It is important for physicians and their key staff to keep abreast of ways to weather the coming storm of change to the healthcare system. It is also very important to begin to focus on marketing your medical services in cost effective ways.

Unfortunately, most of the advice out there today as it pertains to medical practice marketing is just flat out wrong. Your medical practice is not a Fortune 500 company, and the traditional “branding” marketing books (despite the best intentions of the consultants who write them) are simply not cost effective for you or your practice. If you attempt to implement the advice contained in most marketing books, you will be flushing money down the toilet.

That is why [PrivatePractice.MD](http://www.PrivatePractice.MD) was created. To bring you the medical practice building business and marketing advice that actually works to affordably and cost-effectively bring new patients through your doors, and keep them as loyal patients for as long as possible.

The goal for PrivatePractice.MD is to help your private medical practice become a premier practice and medical service provider to your patients by creating a Legendary Service Culture in your practice.

As a member of the growing community at www.PrivatePractice.MD, you will regularly learn useful ideas and tips to run your practice more effectively and successfully. The content is updated continuously, so check back often for updates and you are encouraged to become an

active member of the community, exchanging ideas and solutions with your fellow physicians. Please share your knowledge with your fellow members.

Thank you for joining, and I look forward to serving your needs. Please do not hesitate to let me know your thoughts or comments on these Ten Keys to Success by emailing me at the address below, or by posting or commenting on any of the articles or conversations on the website!

Dedicated To Your Success,

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