

Choosing the Right Group Practice

by Mary Ellen Scaturro

Evaluating practice opportunities is perhaps the second greatest challenge new physicians face—right behind the process of searching for a position. When physicians are fortunate enough to face the "which opportunity do I take" decision, what is the best way to evaluate each opportunity to ensure a long and happy association?

Personal Objectives

The first step in evaluating practice opportunities comes from within. Knowing yourself—your likes, dislikes, and preferences—can set the tone for the evaluation process and provide a consistent framework for analysis.

Set forth long-term career objectives in writing. What do you want to do in 10 years? How can your next choice move you closer to this goal? What is your geographic preference by region? How will your choices affect your spouse and family? What cultural, educational, and recreational considerations must be met?

Then, make a list of the critical factors as they relate to your objectives, especially those that are directly related to your long-term career. What type of setting is best when measured against career goals—a focused subspecialty practice or a blending of various specialties? What type of hospital and/or institutional ties are available with each practice opportunity? Will choosing a certain location limit the chance to network into the medical community beyond the primary community?

Professionally Speaking

Choosing a group practice can be compared with entering into a mar-

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riage. The personalities involved must be compatible, all participants must be in agreement with the objectives, and the parties must be candid about finances. Remember that it's a two-way street. Not only should the decision makers in the practice agree that you will "fit," it is also critical that you are convinced that the choice is the best one for you.

What are some of the factors to consider?

*Length of "orientation"—how long will it take to be given a full load of patients?

*Personal role in the practice—what will your specific duties involve (and do these match with your personal career goals)?

*Personalities of staff—meet each staff member (physician and nonphysician) and ask direct questions to determine style, personality type, and individual roles.

*Rapport with supervisor—determine the "chain of command" and how well you can communicate with your immediate supervisor.

*Patient demographics—what types of patients does the practice see and what is the payor mix?

*Staff support—how is the staff composed, what is the turnover rate, and does the practice include a PA or intentions of hiring a PA (this is a growing trend that successful practices offer to support their physicians)?

*Compensation and finances—research the financial viability of the practice and also look critically at the compensation package you are being offered, including the frequency and method of review.

The practice manager is a critical link in determining these and other answers that will be crucial to the evaluation process. Asking direct questions will aid in gathering the type of quality information that will help you make a well-thought-out decision.

Family and the Community

How will your decisions affect your spouse and family? Statistics show

that the spouse's preference determines the choice of city nearly 90% of the time, partly because of personal preference and partly due to available career options for the working nonphysician spouse.

Knowing as much as possible about the community is nearly as important as evaluating the elements of the practice. Don't just take the word of real estate agents, chambers of commerce, or other "positive sources." Ask members of the practice, hospital staff, and others to be candid about the amenities and drawbacks of the area.

Brass Tacks—Closing the Deal

If all the components are in place, the final critical step is closing the deal. Ask for a formal offer in writing and request that it be as thorough as possible—salary, benefits, work hours (as much as can be predicted), staff responsibilities, chain-of-command, and so on. Experts advise enlisting an attorney to review any contracts; many successful practices maintain a relationship with an attorney for this and other routine matters, and it is suggested that physicians in negotiation for employment contracts do the same. Your attorney should be one who is not associated with the practice.

The evaluation process can be challenging, but the rewards of finding a "perfect match" can be worth the time spent.

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