

Selecting a Group Practice

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Many challenges and decisions await residents upon completing training. Their journey through medical school and residency is just the beginning. This article will educate residents on the best way to evaluate group-practice opportunities.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

To become best prepared for entering into group practice, residents need to set personal objectives for themselves. Until recently, not much guidance or advice has been given to residents about selecting career opportunities. Advance planning is the key to making job searches less stressful. The following are a few pointers to get the resident started in selecting a group practice.

Personal Objectives

About 18 months before completing your residency, develop a personal objectives list about selecting a group practice. Your list should include geographic preferences, spousal and familial considerations, cultural and educational factors, and leisure and recreational activities. After your list is complete, the first step is to determine geographically where you want to practice. Most physicians prefer to practice where they previously lived or within close proximity to family. If you are single, you may choose to be near a large metropolitan area. If you are married, you may choose to live near your spouse's family. Keep in mind that, in the author's past experience, 90% of the time a physician's spouse will determine where the physician will practice. Your spouse must feel comfortable in a community or he or she may want to relocate again. In addition, when making this geographical decision, be sure to take into account your spouse's career goals and options.

After narrowing down your geographic preference, explore the community. Determine which activities are

important to you and your family. For example, does this community offer the cultural and recreational activities you are interested in for your leisure time? Physicians with active recreational families should seek out the Chamber of Commerce for information on activities. For most married physicians with school-age children, the educational aspect of a community is very important. Some of the most frequently asked questions concern the school systems. Are there any National Merit Scholars? Are there private as well

as public schools, and how do the private schools compare to the public schools? Send away for information on the school system to see if the schools match your agenda. Speak to the principal or superintendent of the schools regarding your particulars. When you are interviewing, go to the school and meet the principal and some teachers and/or parents.

Evaluating group practice opportunities prior to the end of residency and developing a personal objectives list reduces the anxiety and stress many residents feel while pursuing jobs.

EXPLORING YOUR OPTIONS

The AMA defines group practice as three or more physicians who share facilities, personnel, and medical records. How do you find group-practice opportunities in the geographic locations you have chosen? Some of the resources available to physicians seeking career opportunities are medical journals. The classified advertisements in these journals are usually broken down geographically. You may respond in writing or call if a phone number is provided to get further information. State medical societies may also have listings of available group-practice opportunities. You can sometimes register with the state medical societies and notify them that you are seeking a suitable group practice.

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Important Factors to Remember While Choosing a Group Practice

- Geographic preference
- Compensation
- Overall lifestyle
- Benefits
- Access to family and friends
- Call coverage
- Time off
- Size of community
- Educational system
- Malpractice climate
- Climate
- Collegial group

One of the major options available to you is that you are able to contact physician-search firms. Approximately 1 to 1.5 years before completing your residency, contact a search firm and inform them of your geographic preference and send them a copy of your curriculum vitae (CV). Some physician recruiters will help you put your CV together if you have not already done so. When you give your particulars to a search firm, you will be listed on its database. You will be contacted by mail or phone when an opportunity that matches your selection and criteria arises.

If you are able to target your search to specific communities and hospitals, you may consider calling the hospital to see if it has its own in-house recruiter. If the hospital does have an in-house recruiter, he or she may be able to shed some light on your career possibilities within that hospital. If the in-house recruiter is not aware of all the group practices that are looking for physicians in that area, you may be limited to the groups that are actively seeking an associate.

Networking is another effective tool that can aid physicians in exploring practice opportunities. This can be done 12 to 18 months prior to completing residency.

Networking may be accomplished in several ways: By word of mouth, through faculty members at your residency program, through your colleagues, by attending annual specialty meetings, by speaking with potential employers, by building relationships with physician-search firms, and by responding to mass-mail campaigns and advertisements.

OBTAINING A HISTORY OF THE GROUP

Obtaining a history of a group is usually done the last year of residency when you have selected several locations

and have become interested enough to start actively interviewing. At this point, you must now determine whether you want to practice in a single-specialty group or a multispecialty group. Some appropriate questions to ask include:

- 1) How long has the group been recruiting and why?
- 2) How long has the group been in practice and is it growing?
- 3) What is the background training of the physicians in the group?
- 4) What are the patient demographics?
- 5) What is the payer mix?
- 6) What is the composition of the office staff and how long have they been there?
- 7) What is the turnover rate?
- 8) What is the financial viability of the group?

Once you have the answers to these basic questions about the group, you will be able to determine your basic interest level. If you are working with a search firm, some of these questions may be answered by telephone prior to your interview.

Approximately 6 to 12 months prior to graduation you should have made up your mind about where you will interview. If you have been working with a recruiter, you may have a good understanding of some of the important questions you must ask, such as compensation, benefits, stock options, call-coverage arrangements, and number of years before partnership eligibility. If you are exploring all of the above questions on your own you may not get the answers until you physically interview with the group.

You should allow yourself at least 1 to 2 days to interview with a group practice, and you should meet with as many physicians in the group as possible. Try to meet the group-practice manager, tour the admitting hospitals, meet the administrators, go on rounds with the physicians in the hospital, observe the group during office hours to see how busy they are and how everyone gets along, tour the community with a Realtor, and visit schools if appropriate.

COMPENSATION

Regarding compensation and benefits, ask the following questions: Will there be a net-income guarantee or a salary in the first year? Will there be a loan guarantee? Is there a sign-on bonus and how much is it? Who will be responsible for this? Will there be raises in the following years? Is there a bonus system? What are the ranges of bonuses paid out over the last 3 years? Is there a contract for the position, and what are the terms of the contract? Is it reviewed annually? Is it a 2 to 3 year contract? Is malpractice paid? Are health insurance, family coverage, disability, life, dental, vacation time, sick leave, dues, fees, and subscriptions paid? Is there a pension plan? Is there an

Types of Group Practice*

Organizations that combining all necessary services,
including hospital services.

Joint ventures with hospitals

Not-for-profit foundation models

Group practices employed by and based in hospitals

Contract services provided by a medical group

Partnerships between independent groups and
Hospitals

*There are variations of these and other alternatives.

allowance for continuing medical education? Is there a car allowance? Are there stock options? How many years before partnership eligibility? Are moving expenses paid? Is office space provided or do you pay rent?

NEGOTIATING AND CLOSING THE DEAL

One of the most crucial steps in selecting a group practice is negotiating the deal. Your journey up to now may have been stress free, but it is very common to see many deals fall apart at this step. It is always a good idea to seek legal advice from an attorney before negotiating with a group practice. Sometimes a group may verbally make you an offer, but it is essential that you get the offer in writing so that there are no misunderstandings. Check to make sure the group has not had many liability cases. You will also want to find out if there have been any lawsuits in the past or if any are pending. Your attorney can best advise you about buy-ins and partnership agreements, assist in contract discussions, review letters of intent and contracts for appropriate verbiage, and other areas that need further discussion. In summary, always make sure your attorney reviews the final document and explains everything to you before you sign the contract and close the deal.

If you follow any of the above suggestions, you may find your journey into group practice much less stressful and much more enjoyable. Advance preparation allows for a successful group-practice selection.