

Selection of a Consultant for your Cardiovascular Practice-*Caveat Emptor*

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Are you thinking of using a consultant to assist you in your practice? A significant number of your colleagues are contemplating undertaking such an engagement. In fact, it is one of the most frequently asked questions heard in the doctor's lounge.

Traditionally, medical practitioners, especially individuals practicing in small to medium sized practices, have turned first to their legal counsel and accountants for advice. However, are these the best sources of first counsel for your business given the current environment?

In a rapidly changing environment it is frequently helpful to have outside expertise to assist you in achieving your goals. While there are many consultants offering their services, there are a few who have first hand experience and knowledge in the business as well as the practice of medicine. Routine legal and accounting expertise may not be the best choice to serve as your initial advisor. Indeed, as we progress into a more heavily managed care environment those practices

which can amalgamate the business and the processes of clinical care may find themselves with a strategic advantage.

People seek the help of consultants for many reasons. Often, they are looking to obtain assistance in succeeding in meeting the challenges of a current business and professional environment. These may include developing managed care strategies, assessing the effectiveness and quality of services provided, performing general operation reviews, evaluating procedures, providing input on cost containment measures, advising on organization structures (practice mergers/acquisitions/ managed service organization development/ physician-hospital organizational development/development of networks), explore information technologies and options, develop a marketing plan for the practice, analyze billing procedures and the list goes on.

There needs to be an organized approach to the use of a consultant in your business and practice and, I would submit that much of the same logic used in utilization of a consultant for your patients is applicable in the selection process.

Begin in an orderly manner. *What* are the symptoms or issues you wish to have addressed? Perhaps you are unclear or have difficulty precisely defining the problem. Not to worry. How many or your patients tell you precisely that they have

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left anterior descending coronary artery disease or angina? Begin as generally as you and the members of your practice feel capable. Perhaps it is nothing more than a litany of concerns.

Next, proceed to an *examination* of the problem. This is something your consultant will add upon, but to the extent you are capable of providing data to substantiate your concerns you will be more successful in finding solutions. It may be nothing more than a trend in revenue streams or a trend in the number of patients seen or where they are seen. To the extent that you can provide your consultant with specifics and data concerning your perceived problem or issues, the analysis becomes more focused.

Actual selection of a consultant needs to be done carefully. A consultant needs to bring you more than information. Information exists in numerous databases. More importantly, a consultant brings you knowledge. Henry David Thoreau, a Harvard graduate, once wrote that he could learn more about navigation by taking a short trip down the river in his small skiff than by studying the subject at Harvard for four years. So, too, with the people you turn to for advice. Why

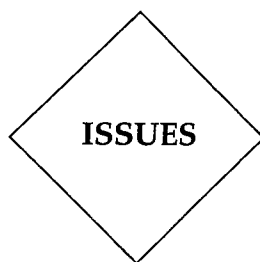
would you select a strategist for your practice who isn't knowledgeable about the practice of medicine? As a physician, would you feel comfortable serving as a strategist to the legal profession? Is your legal counsel the most suited for serving as a strategist for your medical practice? Explore the backgrounds of individuals very carefully. Why would you select a surgeon who has only read about medicine for advice on your patient who needs surgery? Don't be afraid to ask what your consultant did before they came to their current position and explore their level of expertise.

It should also be noted that the consulting industry is going through a considerable amount of consolidation and change just as is occurring in the medical profession. Many mid-sized firms are losing out to small boutique firms or very large conglomerates. Some of the very large firms experience turnover rates of as much as fifteen percent (Wall Street Journal, March 6, 1996). Additionally, on many occasions, the work in large consulting firms is performed by individuals who are frequently not at the partnership level. Determining who will be the individual with whom you and your colleagues interact on a regular basis

Steps in Selecting an Advisor or Consultant

State the Problem as You See It

Acquire Initial Data



Be Willing to Work with Your Advisor in Providing More Data, Opinions, etc.

Select an Advisor

- Skills
- Knowledge Base
- Access to Others with Needed Skill or Talents

becomes a critical component of the consultant–client relationship.

Selection of a consultant revolves around two key issues: skill and knowledge base. First, *skill* is needed to solve the problem. This usually entails provision of a skill or talent that doesn't exist within your practice or "in house" and the ability to *communicate* such to you and your colleagues. Sometimes just having a talented, tactful individual to facilitate discussions from an outside dispassionate vantage point can be helpful. Second, *knowledge* of the practice of medicine and the interaction between and among physicians, combined with a thorough understanding of every facet of health care delivery affecting the processes of clinical care, becomes invaluable in framing workable solutions.

Explore these matters in great detail. No consultant can be all things to all people. However, more importantly is a fundamental understanding of your core business. The fundamentals of medical practice are patient care and the processes of care. Interpretation of business issues relating to the care of patients provides meaningful pillars and foundations upon which to build solutions. All of the possible reasons for why you would select a consultant as outlined above necessitate an understanding of medicine if the solutions are to be meaningfully applied in a medical practice environment.

There is no substitute for expert assistance. Good medical business consultants, like good diagnosticians and specialists, can provide long lasting benefits to you and your practice. The best consultants have good philosophies that spawn methods and solutions rather than necessarily coming to the table with a pre-packaged methodology. Exploration of the philosophies of your consultants prior to a formal engagement will often save you much heartache and lost revenue. Be leery of individuals who come with preconceived notions or the management motif of the month. A significant amount of retooling and redesign needs to occur within health care delivery systems. However, they need to be done cognizant of the intricacies of a doctor–patient relationship and the core business of patient care.

"Who taught you all this, doctor?"

The reply came promptly: "Suffering."

— Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Just as the astute clinical diagnostician builds on an experience base and is capable of applying his knowledge to the patient. So, too, that same experience base and understanding of clinical process needs to be part and parcel of your medical business solutions.