



BY JOSEPH S. EASTERN, M.D.

MANAGING YOUR DERMATOLOGY PRACTICE

Keep Your Staff Current—and Happy

It goes without saying that physicians need to keep their knowledge and skills current, but too many private practitioners overlook the similar needs of their employees. Continuing education is as important for your staff as it is for you.

Like you, staff members provide better care to patients when they know the latest findings and techniques. They also provide better information: When patients ask questions of your staff, either in the office or over the phone (which happens more often than you probably think), you certainly want their answers to be accurate and up to date.

There are a lot of good reasons to invest in ongoing staff training. The more your employees know, the more productive they will be. Not only will they complete everyday duties more efficiently, they will be stimulated to learn new tasks and accept more responsibility.

Staffers who have learned new skills are more willing to take on new challenges. The better their skills and the greater their confidence, the less supervision they need from you and the more they become involved in their work.

They will also be happier in their jobs. Investing in your employees' competence makes them feel valued and appreciated. This leads to reduced turnover, which, alone, often pays for the training.

You already do the yearly OSHA training because the law requires it, and you have everyone recertified periodically in basic or advanced CPR (or you should). I'm talking about going beyond the basic stuff that satisfies legal requirements but does not motivate your people to loftier goals.

An obvious example is sending your insurance people annually to coding and insurance processing courses so they are always current on the latest third-party changes. Others include keyboarding and computer courses for staff members who work with computers, and Excel and QuickBooks classes for your bookkeeper.

Continuing education does not have to be costly, and in some cases it can be free. Pharmaceutical representatives will be happy to thoroughly brief your staff on a new medication or medical instrument, or to refresh their memories on an established one. Just make sure the presentation is as impartial as possible, given the obvious conflict of interest involved.

Your office manager should join the Association of Dermatology Administrators/Managers (www.ada-m.org). It holds annual meetings at the same time and in the same city as the American Academy of Dermatology winter meetings and offers a good selection of refresher courses and lots of opportunities for networking with other managers.

Many other venues are available for employee education, both online and in conventional classrooms.

Courses are offered in a wide variety of relevant subjects, including medical terminology, record keeping and accounting, laboratory skills, diagnostic tests and procedures, pharmacology and medication administration, patient relations, medical law and ethics, and many others.

By far, the most common question I receive on this issue is this: "What if I pay for all that training and the employees leave?"

My answer, invariably, is this: "What if you don't, and they stay?"

Well-trained employees are vastly preferable to untrained ones, even with the small risk of the occasional staffer who accepts training and then moves on. By and large, well-trained employees will stay. Education fosters loyalty.

Employees who know that you care enough about them to advance their skills will sense that they have a stake in the prac-

and will be less likely to want to leave.

In any case, everyone will benefit from a well-trained staff: you, your employees, your practice, and most importantly, your patients. ■

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