

How Do I Figure Out Whether the Practice is Okay?

By Richard C. Koval, M.P.A., CMPE

Dr. Ready had completed a handful of telephone interviews with various practices when the managing partner from one of her favorites called to offer an onsite visit. She felt pleased that she had made it past the “first cut” and flattered that the doctors were interested enough to invite her for a personal interview.

However, she also felt a bit of anxiety as the managing partner emphasized the practice’s willingness to be totally open with her. “We’ll show you anything you feel you need to see during your visit, warts and all---ask us anything!” he had said. While she was grateful for the group’s openness, she also had little idea what to ask.

She confided to a colleague: “I want to look good to the practice, as though I know what I’m doing. And I want to ask the right questions so I can make a good decision about whether this group is best for me. But I also don’t want to look stupid or offend anyone by asking the wrong questions. I just don’t know what to ask! And how do I figure out whether the practice is okay?”

The Onsite Interview

The onsite interview is a wonderful opportunity to obtain a close-up, in-depth look at a potential practice, allowing you to make an informed decision as to how you would fit within that setting. As an integral part of your interview preparation, you should identify certain key aspects for confirmation during the visit, along with an appropriate process for obtaining the information needed for your assessment. The provisions of the contract should speak for themselves based on the formal employment agreement or letter of intent presented at the time a job offer is extended. But additional aspects should be investigated during the visit, which can usually be explored by asking the following questions:

- *How busy will I be? Where would my patients come from?* The practice should be able to provide you a clear understanding of both issues based on its formal analysis of the practice’s circumstances demonstrating unmet demand for what you’ll do. That demand may be demonstrated by volume available from a planned slowdown or retirement of one of the current physicians, from a significant number of referrals being sent to outside physicians, or from overall growth in the local area suggesting the need for additional services. A recruitment process lacking this data or based on informal assumption (“everyone we’ve every recruited has always been busy enough”) may work out eventually, but the time span for building your practice will be longer, and the long-term success of your position will be much more at risk.
- *To what extent does the local market show a likelihood of increasing its demand for services within my specialty?* The practice should demonstrate positive demographic trends, whether by age, income, or other criteria, supporting continued growth in the local market for the things you intend to do as a physician. A stagnant or shrinking market may be viable at first but could eventually become unworkable for you.

- *How busy are the group's current physicians? Are any physicians planning to alter their current personal practice volume soon?* As a new associate, the last thing you'll need is internal competition from other physicians in the group, fighting for every last patient or procedure. Ideally, the other physicians will be as busy as they wish to be with little interest in ramping up their personal volumes in any significant way. Those circumstances will allow you to benefit from the majority of new patients to the practice and avoid the potential animosity of colleagues seeking to protect their turf and outcompete you.
- *To what extent would I be likely to face problems with hospital credentialing or acceptance to key payer provider panels?* Make sure you'll have no difficulty obtaining hospital or ASC staff privileges and gaining access to facilities and equipment necessary for your personal practice. Confirm that you'll face no problems being added to the provider panels of major payers with which the practice contracts. Keep in mind that your payer profile may differ somewhat from that of your colleagues in the practice, leaving you more dependent on certain payers, especially if you'll be practicing within a different subspecialty. Also confirm the time required for the application process to ensure minimal delays in seeing patients once you arrive.
- *Have any physicians recently left the group? If so, for what reasons? Are these individuals available to discuss their experiences with the practice?* Oftentimes, the need for a new associate arises because a prior physician chose to leave the group to pursue another opportunity. In many cases, those decisions are independent of the practice but in other cases, the reasons for leaving can reappear and affect your situation, too. Use appropriate judgment in resolving differences between the "story" offered by the practice and the description offered by a prior, disgruntled associate.
- *Has the practice successfully added associates in recent years? Have any individuals recently completed the buy-in process?* Prior recruitment success can be a great indicator of your success in the group, suggesting the practice has an ability to deliver what it promises. Be sure to include one-on-one time with younger associates during the visit, asking them about their degree of satisfaction as a group member, the extent that their positions have met their expectations, and any advice they'd give you as a prospective associate.
- *Are the practice's most recent financial trends positive when measured by collections, expenses, net income, and patient visits?* Ideally, you'll want to join a practice that's healthy and shows great prospects for continued success. Examination of basic financial documents can confirm this aspect. Collections over the most recent three years should increase, expenses should either remain proportionate to collections over time or decrease, net income (i.e., profit) should be stable or increase, and established and new patient visits should increase. The practice should be able to provide you access to source documents or provide a summary of these indices for your review. This is especially important if you are considering a potential co-ownership opportunity with the practice down the road.

Not only should the answers to these questions be positive, but you should look for objective evidence that confirms those answers. Just because the practice is confident in its ability to sustain you and continue its past successes doesn't necessarily mean it can deliver on its promises or continue its winning streak.

While you're visiting the practice location, also make a point of looking for the following:

- *Do staff members appear to be capable, well-trained, courteous, and positive?* This aspect can often be assessed by simply spending several minutes in the waiting area or in the patient examination rooms, observing how staff members interact with physicians and patients. Much of your patients' assessment of you as a physician will be based on their assessment of your staff, so this issue should be of primary importance. You also might spend a few moments visiting with individual staff members, inquiring about their history with the practice and their perceptions about the adequacy of the practice as an employer.
- *Is the office clean, comfortable and well-organized?* Again, the office will form a substantial part of your patients' impressions of you as a physician. An opulent palace may not be necessary for your specialty, but the physical space should meet a typical patient's expectations for cleanliness, comfort, and organization. Be sure that the physical layout is conducive to the efficient delivery of care to patients, avoiding bottlenecks or problems that would frustrate your efforts to build a busy practice.
- *How adequate would your personal practice space be for providing patient care?* Be sure to look at the actual physical space where you'd work to determine whether it's roomy enough, provides appropriate workflow connections, is aesthetically pleasant, is easy for patients to find, and is adequate for you to function efficiently. Also, ensure that it's large enough to accommodate whatever equipment and staffing needs you are likely to have.
- *Is the office and hospital/surgery center in a good location with reasonable access to public transit and parking?* A "good location" means it works for you and your patients. On your side, you'll want to avoid spending inordinate amounts of time in traffic between offices or between the office and the hospital or ASC. On your patients' side, if your practice serves individuals with limited economic means or limited mobility, access to public transit and good parking will be essential. For all patients, a location that's safe and convenient is ideal.
- *Is the equipment you'll need up-to-date and in good condition?* Be sure to examine key items of equipment you'll need to ensure it's workable and adequate for your needs. This should include not only the practice office but also any hospital or ASC where you'll be performing procedures. Any deficiencies should be noted for later discussion and negotiation with the group.
- *Are medical records well-organized and easily accessible? Are interfaces used by the physicians conducive to efficiency?* Take a good look at how patient information is recorded, whether through paper records or electronic health records (EHR). If the

former, be sure to inquire as to the practice's plans for conversion, including timing, likely system, etc. If the latter, take a few moments to understand the basics of how the EHR system works and its similarities and differences compared to the system you currently use.

- *Is the practice's overall presentation consistent with the image you have in mind for your personal practice?* This aspect encompasses the physical facility where you'd be working and the philosophy of the practice toward patient care. If you find yourself judging any significant aspect as needing to be changed once you get there, be sure that assumption is realistic. Many practices have certain ways of doing things that aren't easy to modify and are largely resistant to being changed by any one individual.

Spend the time necessary to appropriately assess the personal aspects of the area while visiting, including commuting time to the office, affordability of housing, access to recreational and social interests, proximity of the area to extended family, compatibility with educational and employment needs of your spouse, and other key factors.

Making an Informed Decision

In this case, Dr. Ready would be well-served to prepare a checklist of questions to ask during the various interviews with group members, and an additional list of key issues for observation during the visit. She should write down observations as the visit proceeds, helping her to remember these observations and various answers in response to her questions. All of these elements will combine to provide means for an informed decision, thus enhancing the prospects for her success within the practice she eventually chooses.

***About the author:** Richard C. Koval, M.P.A., CMPE, is principal and senior consultant with BSM Consulting. He is based in Reno, Nevada. His e-mail is rkoval@bsmconsulting.com.*