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THE INTEGRATION OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE AND URGENT CARE

Written by [Brigitte Graf](#) | Jun 6, 2014 | [0 Comments](#)

When looking for ways to effectively increase the revenue and patient volume of an urgent care center, an owner will consider a number of different avenues. With consolidation and diversification remaining strong trends in the industry, there's one combination that appears to be a recipe for success: urgent care and occupational medicine.

With the right equipment, training and commitment to the task of taking on an additional specialty such as urgent care or occupational medicine, a center can potentially find balance and create a consistent flow of business.

Urgent Care and OccMed: Differences and Similarities

Occupational medicine, or OccMed, caters to the needs of companies whose employees perform jobs that can be physically demanding. These companies look for a reliable source of preventative medicine for those on the job as well as adequate and timely care for injuries sustained at work. OccMed centers are used for drug and alcohol testing, pre-employment physicals and workers' compensation injuries.

In contrast, urgent care focuses on the needs of the here-and-now patient as opposed to the short and long term needs of a company. It is situational and at times even seasonal (i.e. flu season, cold season, etc.). Additionally, once the patient's immediate health needs are met, the urgent care physician will transfer the case over to a primary care physician if necessary. In most situations very little follow-up, if any, is required of the urgent care practitioner.

"Occupational medicine is a multifaceted program with many different service lines," said Dr. Clayton Van Balen, an occupational medicine physician at Sanford Health. "It's not only taking care of the injured individual, but it's taking care of wellness, interacting with the company, providing physicals, physical therapy services, travel medicine, anything that has to do with the employee. It's longitudinal care for some, individual care for others."

The nature of urgent care, however, is such that the physician should be ready for any and every type of illness or injury. Because of this, OccMed could sensibly fit within the skill-set and capabilities of that physician, and vice versa. However, according to Alan Ayers, National Expert in Urgent Care Operations and Business Development and Vice President of Market Development for Concentra, the approach in which a doctor takes to each case is where the difference lies.

"From a physician practice perspective, you might have two patients show up with the same injuries," Ayers said. "One got that injury at work and the other at home. There are different ways to approach each. For

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MEET THE PUBLISHER

Blayne Rush



workers' comp, the objective is to get that employee back to work as soon as possible. From the urgent care side, often times the urgent care physician is eager to please the patient, ordering time off work and prescribing certain narcotics for pain to accommodate the patient."

Benefits of Combining

Dr. John Koehler, founder of Physicians Immediate Care in Rockford, Il., sums up the motivations for bringing OccMed into an urgent care center in one word: survival.

"Urgent care sometimes isn't enough to float the boat," Koehler said. "You need patient traffic, revenue stream; [occupational medicine] pays really well. It's very expensive to just have a physician sitting and waiting for long periods of time between patients. Theoretically, if you're sitting idly at 15 patients a day and losing money, you add occupational medicine and raise your visits another 15 a day, you can possibly become profitable."

Ayers echoes this sentiment, noting that the seasonal aspects of urgent care can be neatly supplemented by the addition of OccMed.

"Urgent care centers tend to be busiest in the evening, on the weekends, and during the winter months," he said. "Occupational medicine is a way, because physicals can be scheduled appointments, to even out the volume to the urgent care center. During the slow times in the afternoons or during the summer months, the opportunity is to not only build volume but to smooth the ebb and flow of the business."

Combining the two can also serve as a mode of generating more business, according to Van Balen. In his experience, treating an employee for a work related injury and building a relationship with that patient in the process can result in that patient returning to the center for care outside of work as well.

"By integrating service lines, you have the opportunity to provide more services," Van Balen said. "If one line decreases, the other line picks up. It creates a more consistent year round business. If you want to have a diverse patient population with expanded service lines and continuous business, you integrate both."

Furthermore, by adding one specialty to the other, a center can expand its business through extended hours of operation and even through growth into different locations.

"When you look at occupational medicine, the client base is typically blue collar, more industrial," Ayers said. "What happens is when cities grow, there's a need for occupational medicine in the suburbs, but there's not enough employment to justify a purely occupational medicine clinic. By adding urgent care, occupational medicine centers are able to go into those growing suburban areas. It's kind of a convergence of the two fields."

Making it Happen

There are several areas that need to be addressed when attempting to bring occupational medicine to urgent care, or vice versa. Staffing requirement, certifications, billing methods and costs of equipment need to be considered.

Some of the equipment needed to properly take on occupational medicine includes a pulmonary function tester, an audiometer audio booth, a Titmusvision tester, a breathe alcohol tester (BAT), and a respirator fit testing hood or portacount. Additionally, the center should have a bathroom that is properly outfitted for drug testing.

The sales and marketing aspect of the business should also be kept in mind when integrating the two.

"The main capability that isn't in place in urgent care centers would have to do with the sales force that occupational medicine centers have," Ayers said. "That's somebody who builds relationships with local employers. Urgent care centers really advertise to people directly in the community, whereas for occupational medicine, you'd have to be out in front of employers and decision-makers in companies who decide where to send injured workers or employees for physicals and drug testing."

Koehler advises those considering this option to recognize that execution, not simply purchasing the necessary machinery, is imperative to success.

"You might buy all the machines and hire the right marketing people, but if you don't have the right staff and training you won't get very far with these companies and you're wasting your money," Koehler said. "Urgent care offices are perfect for being the venue for it. You have long hours, walk-ins welcome, no appointment needed. The key is that you have to deliver it."



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While the skills and expertise requirements of the physician in both realms of medicine are typically the same, the physician who takes on occupational medicine must have a firm resolve when dealing with work related injuries, according to Van Balen.


“That person is key,” he said. “[The physician] needs to have confidence and experience. You need someone who won’t wilt and is willing to not back down when breaking the tough news to some difficult cases. If you want to be the provider of choice for companies, you can’t simply heed the patient when it comes to how much time they want off from work for an injury. The approach in occupational medicine is that the patient will always go back to work, period. That takes a strong provider.”

Overall, Koehler feels that there is one final and crucial point to emphasize to owners attempting to take on urgent care and occupational medicine together: commitment.


“You have to make sure you are completely committed to making the change,” Koehler said. “If you aren’t, then you’ll end up frustrating yourself, your staff, and anybody you try to reach out to.”

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3