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FEEDBACK/SURVEYS

Career Change May Open New Doors

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[Commentary](#)

[Lorne E. Weeks, MD](#)

[Bob Priddy](#)

The frustration many physicians are feeling in today's health care environment is spurring a large number of them to consider leaving the clinical practice of medicine. But just the idea of doing so makes many of these physicians feel guilty, a reaction that is understandable given that being a doctor is a profession they love and one they entered in a desire to serve others.

Any physician who is burdened with such guilt is not alone, at least according to the results of recent surveys. For example, a survey by the California Medical Association showed that 75% of the responding physicians had become less happy in their practices within the preceding five years. Another survey, by Merritt Hawkins & Associates, a physician search and consulting firm in Irving, Texas, showed that 60% of physicians over age 50 were planning to leave their present practices within three years.

The message is clear: U.S. physicians are frustrated by the growing hurdles of government intrusion, angered by declining reimbursement, irritated by increasing reporting requirements, and tired of seeing more of their personal time going to administrative demands and paperwork.

Changes to Consider

Consultants and advisers to physicians who have heard their complaints have also found that many physicians have no idea what they would be doing if they were not seeing patients

every day. After many years of education, focused training, and practice, doctors feel as if they have painted themselves into a corner, even though the time was spent acquiring the skills and experience they once coveted.

Often, these physicians believe there are only a few narrow avenues open to them. One could, for example, be a sales representative for medical company or a medical director for a biotechnology firm. Or, one might, perhaps, work as an administrator for a managed care company. However, they rarely consider the broader career paths open to them. For each physician considering a career move, determining the best steps to take is critical for making the move a success. Undoubtedly, taking the steps required to make a change can be difficult. Even so, here are some ideas that may help make the process more manageable.

First, any physician thinking about embarking on a new career should remember that we all find comfort in what is familiar to us, so we are likely to be uncomfortable in the uncharted waters between the career we have known and the new one we are seeking. Many physicians have never been unemployed in their adult lives, so the concept of unemployment for a highly skilled and respected physician is often unthinkable and quite different from anything many physicians have ever experienced.

What's more, given the large numbers of physicians who are leaving practice today, doctors are being viewed by hiring companies as commodities even more so now than they were in the past. In other words: The market is not as welcoming to physicians as it once was.

The Right Approach

But there are reasons to be optimistic when making a career change. With critical objective analysis and the right approach, physicians can find jobs they like even better than the ones they had previously. Consider the experience of Robert L. Cox, MD, who was once one of the most respected infectious disease specialists in Denver.

After health concerns sidelined him from practice, Cox began to

ask himself what he could do next. He worked closely with career advisers to help him answer this question. “I tore apart my life and analyzed the things I liked most and the things I disliked the most,” Cox told the Denver Business Journal in an article this summer. “It helped me determine the things I wanted to have in my future. I found that whatever I did in the future had to contain medicine, speaking, and travel, and so I looked at different opportunities that would allow me to combine those three.”

During the data-gathering processes with his career advisers, Cox revealed that he had long been interested in making presentations to groups. In other words, he believed he would enjoy transferring his vast medical knowledge and experience to interested listeners, and he thought if he could combine this work with travel to interesting places, he would have the ideal job.

Cox’s advisers gathered objective data about him using the Birkman method, a career testing and assessment model designed for mid-career executives and professionals by Birkman International in Houston. This method is used to assess human potential and help enhance performance. The Birkman results for Cox reinforced what he was saying about his ability to communicate and teach, as well as his deep interest in medicine. As a result of this information, his advisers introduced him to experts who could help him shape his natural presentation skills into a polished and compelling style.

Earlier this year, Cox established BioForecasts, a company in Denver. He now speaks to both medical and nonmedical groups, helping audiences understand how developments in biomedicine will change the world, in terms of health, longevity, ethics, economics, and warfare.

While there were many jobs Cox could do, his new position is what he loves and should be doing. “It’s absolutely perfect for me,” he told the Journal. “It gives me flexibility, and the stress level is lower and manageable. I can continue to do this as long as I want to.”

Data and Analysis

Cox's experience offers an example of what the best career advisers can do for their clients. In fact, the career counselors who are most effective will follow a continuum of client care that is modeled on the patient examination process exhibited in the SOAP model (an acronym for subjective and objective assessment, and plan).

First, the counselors will obtain subjective information from an interview with the client. Next, they will gather objective data using a tool such as the Birkman data-gathering method. While both of these data-mining tools are important, the objective tool can be used to help confirm the professional's assessment.

The Birkman method is one of the best ways to assess a client objectively. It helps a career adviser primarily by identifying what the client would ideally like to do and then translating that information into specific industries and job titles. By combining the objective data with the subjective evaluation, the career adviser obtains a clear assessment of the client's situation. Based on that assessment, the client works with the career adviser to develop an implementation plan.

Physicians relate well to the SOAP model because it is based on principles similar to those they have used daily throughout their careers in clinical practice. The model also is useful because it helps to keep the process focused and on track. To suggest an analogy: Physician clients seeking career advice are like most patients in that they want immediate results and they prefer to begin implementing a "treatment" plan without delay.

By following the SOAP format, the most effective career advisers will help their clients focus on their present needs, while emphasizing the importance of diagnosing the problem before making a treatment decision. What's more, the SOAP format enables physicians to remain with the program of treatment while they evaluate the results of their decision.

Seeking Positive Outcomes

For many physicians, moving from the known (a job they have held for many years) to the unknown (a new career) is extremely difficult. Some resent the fact that they have to pay for career advice or for help in finding a job. Yet, the reality is

that most physicians do not know how to search for a job, to evaluate their career options, or to start down a new career path. What's more, after having paid for their career counseling, many physicians expect a guarantee of success. Unfortunately, finding a new career is like any other endeavor in life: There are no guarantees.

The most effective career advisers are likely to relate to physicians just as doctors relate to patients. In other words, as physicians do with their patients, career consultants make commitments to their clients that they will use their best efforts and all appropriate resources to help them reach their career objectives, but they can offer no guarantees that the outcome will be positive.

Interestingly, the career counseling business is changing in some of the same ways that the practice of medicine is changing. For example, many physicians are now doing more than simply working to treat patients who are ill; some are taking a more active role in seeking to maintain the health of their patients by offering wellness services. Similarly, career advisers are looking to do more for their physician clients than simply offering advice on how to find a new job.

As a result, it makes sense for physicians to seek a career counseling firm that has expertise in many areas of specialization (such as medical school, residency, fellowship, private practice, academic medicine, corporate employment, nonclinical careers, retirement, and even postretirement). In fact, some of the best career counseling firms are becoming involved in many different aspects of a physician's practice (such as contracting, practice evaluation and management, and financial planning), as well as providing lawyers to offer legal services.

The case of one client (whom we will call Jane Doe, MD) exemplifies the range of services that are currently available to physicians who are seeking help from career counseling firms.

After completing her residency earlier this year, Doe was referred to a career counselor for an initial consultation. Subsequently, the legal affiliate of the career counselor's firm

reviewed the contracts Doe had been offered. The financial advisers helped her develop a financial plan, and a specialist in practice evaluation and management represented her to medical groups seeking to hire new physicians. Doe also met with a physician working for the career counseling firm, who provided advice and assistance as Doe makes the transition from residency to practice.

Getting Results

Physicians seeking the advice of a career counselor do so for a variety of reasons. Some, like Doe, are seeking direction in their careers. Others may simply want to reenergize an existing practice, find a network of their peers to seek solutions to common problems, or voice their career frustrations. Some may want to move into a nonclinical role, or they may wish to plan for a satisfying career after their retirement. Career counselors should be able to provide all of these services.

There are two things that most physicians who go to a career counselor do not want. First, they do not want to have to pay an hourly rate for career consulting services, as many have done in the past. In other words, the physicians are willing to pay for results but they do not want to have to watch the meter run every time they call the counselor to ask a question. Today, the best career counseling firms charge their clients a fee that allows them to call at any time with a question at no extra charge.

Second, physicians do not want to have to shop for related counseling services; they want one-stop-shopping. In other words, if they find out during a meeting with a career adviser that they may need contract advice before they can leave or change their practice environment, many would prefer not to have to stop working with their career counselor in order to shop for an attorney.

The best career counseling firms have such expertise available to their clients, as well as financial advice and practice evaluation services as needed.

The new career move for physicians doesn't need to be dramatic; for some, the change could involve remaining in

clinical practice while adding some nonclinical pursuits as well. Chet Cedars, MD, a successful family practitioner in Denver, is a good example of someone who made some career changes after he recognized that the practice of medicine might not be leading him to a future in which he would feel comfortable. After meeting with a career adviser, Cedars made some career changes that allow him to practice part-time and serve as a health care consultant to physician groups and health care provider organizations that are introducing electronic medical records to their practices.

Cedars is like Cox and Doe in that—with the help of career counselors—these physicians have made a career change that is not only satisfying to them, but is also allowing them to pursue the medical career they should have based on their own wants and needs.--Bob Priddy and Lorne E. Weeks, MD

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