

PHYSICIANS PRACTICE

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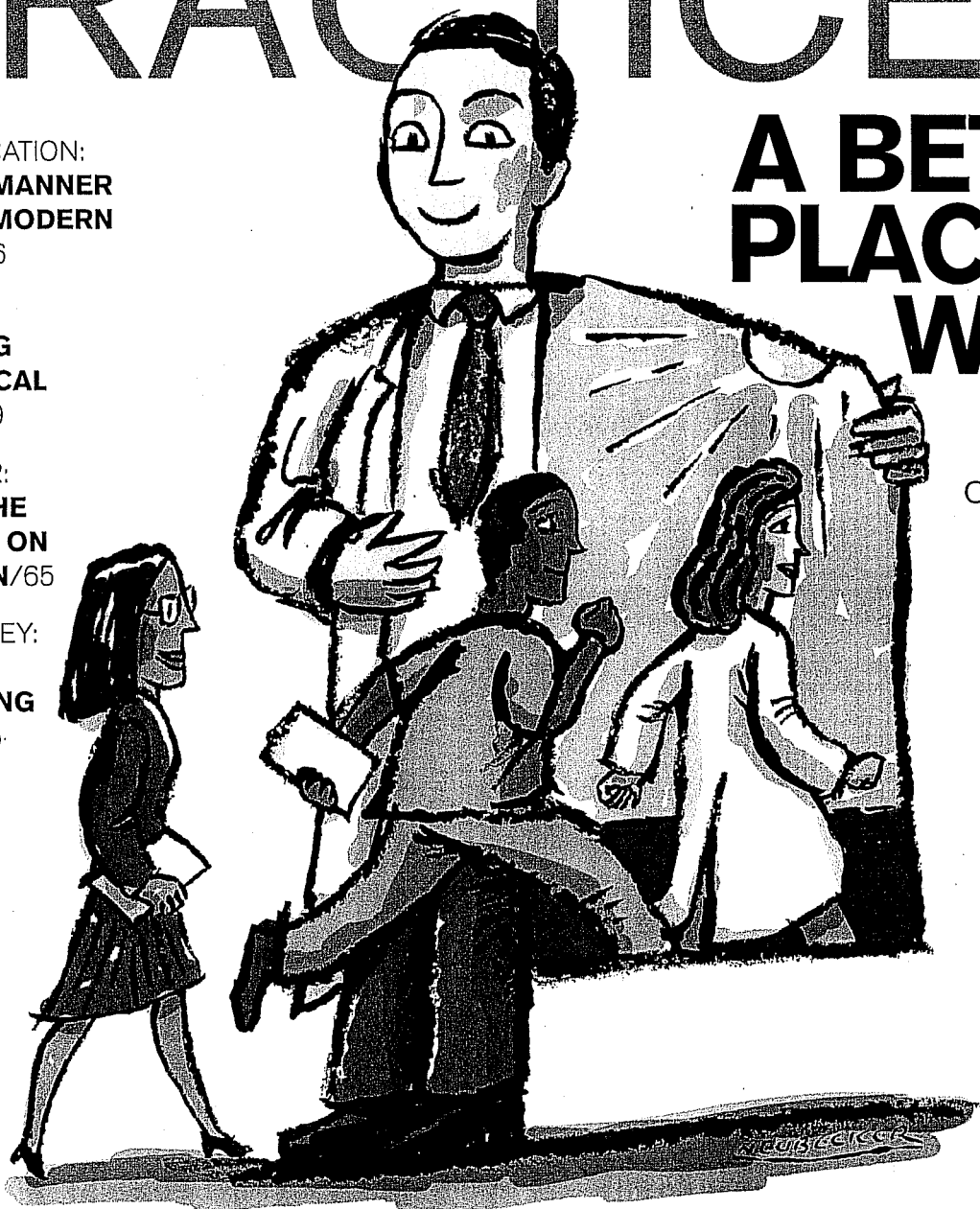
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— FOREVER



WRITE YOUR OWN STORY

BY THERESA DEFINO

HOW TO USE PATIENT NEWSLETTERS TO BUILD LOYALTY, PROMOTE SERVICES

When was the last time you took a moment to chat with a patient about your new bone density scanner or the latest addition to your staff?

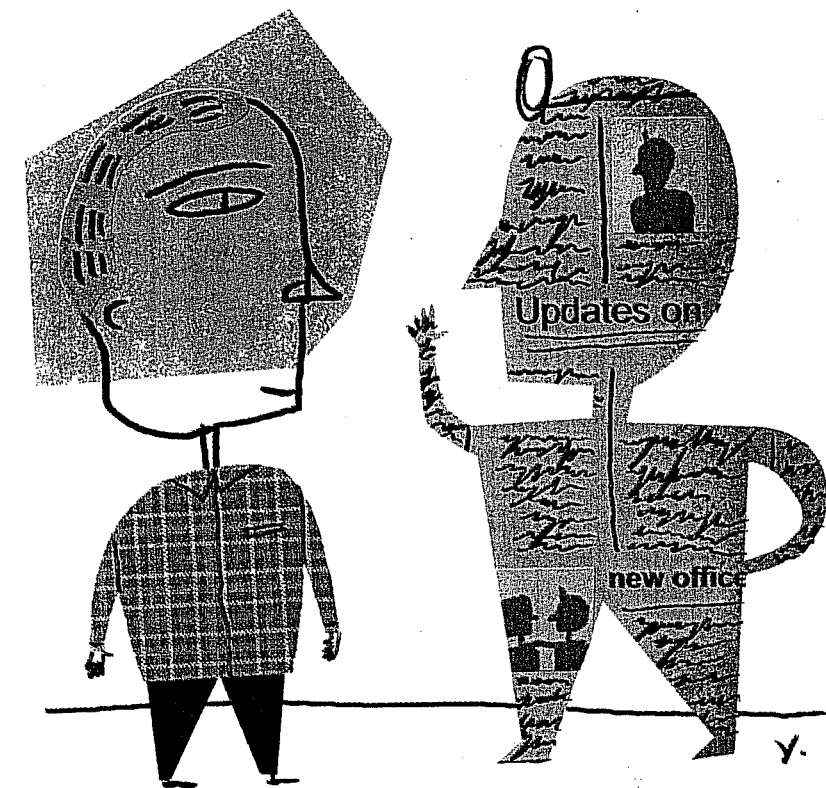
Never? Of course, you're far too busy, right? So rather than talking about yourself and your practice, why not do what the physicians at Georgia Reproductive Specialists do — keep your patients up to date by sending them an informative, friendly, well-written newsletter that also acts as a sophisticated and subtle marketing tool.

"Our main goal is to get more patients; our second goal is education," explains Emily Ledbetter, who produces a monthly newsletter for the reproductive endocrinology group, which has offices in Atlanta, Decatur, and Alpharetta.

At their best, newsletters tell your story in a personal way that patients can identify with, says Mark Perloe, medical director of the four-physician practice. "Advertising by physicians — saying how wonderful you are — doesn't work. If people think you are providing reliable information, that's what brings them to you."

Putting out a newsletter need not be a time-consuming or expensive exercise. You could do one with the help of office staff and the physicians, with few costs above printing and postage. Or you could even save those expenses by e-mailing the newsletter.

In addition to promoting your office, producing a newsletter is a way of kindling some internal good feelings. Strengthen your team by soliciting ideas for content from all members of your staff, clinical as



well as administrative. And share your "good news" with them before sending it out to patients.

THAT OLD SOFT-SELL WORKS

A newsletter "absolutely" should be considered by medical groups, says Robert A. Tennant, senior policy adviser for the Medical Group Management Association. "Not enough practices think about marketing, and this falls into that bailiwick."

Perloe sees a definitive business purpose behind his newsletter. "There are four infertility practices in our community. We try to use communication as something that makes us stand out," he says.

A newsletter can serve a family practice that treats common diagnoses as well as a specialty group that deals with infertility, behavioral

health, or cardiovascular problems. It can build loyalty among current patients, and when sent to potential patients, help introduce them to your practice.

"They read something that clicks with them or that convinces them that this is the practice they should go to," Perloe says.

The Georgia practice started its patient newsletter in January of this year and also has put out a quarterly newsletter for referring physicians for several years. While the physician newsletter is mailed, the consumer or patient version is e-mailed.

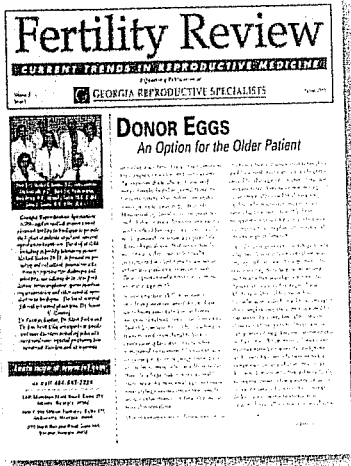
Included in every issue are topics of interest to infertile couples, such as a story on polycystic ovary disease. These stories explain a common problem, discuss treatment options, and provide resources for support.

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"Oftentimes I can tweak the information we already have on the Web site," says Ledbetter, who performs other public relations services for the practice. The Web site can be found at www.ivf.com.



Patient newsletters, such as this one from Georgia Reproductive Specialists, are an effective and inexpensive marketing tool.

seminars. Services are also described, including consultations that physicians provide for out-of-town patients.

Practices report that patients respond positively to their newsletters. After each one goes out, Ledbetter gets compliments from thankful readers, who tell her they found support they needed; sometimes former patients will write back with news about their baby, conceived with the help of one of the physicians.

Whenever that happens, she shoots the e-mail to the physician. "It's a little good news for that day," she says.

It isn't always necessary to produce a newsletter on a regular schedule, as the Georgia group does. For example, Cardiovascular Medicine Associates (CMA), an eight-physician practice in Miami, sends out a newsletter whenever there is a specific message to get out. Sometimes it is the addition of a physician, a new service, or cutting-edge technology.

Yale Samole, one of the CMA physicians, says the newsletter serves a variety of purposes. "First and foremost, it reminds patients that they have a doctor, that they belong to our 'club.' This is most helpful for patients who haven't been seen in years in that they can still feel free to call. They are still considered part of our practice. It also reminds patients that they need to once again start thinking about health issues."

Secondly, the quality of the newsletter makes patients feel proud "that their doctors are in the news and that we put out glossy and classy looking materials," he says. "They love to see their doctor's picture and look to see wherever he's being quoted in the text. The articles and biographies continue to validate that we are the premier medical practice in the area. When the patients are proud of the materials, they brag to their friends and become sales people for our practice."

His approach to content differs somewhat from the reproductive

group's. "Keep it simple and human," Samole says. "Patients don't really want to read about all the complicated tests that you're planning on putting them through. Maybe it's better to deal with simple symptoms and perhaps a recipe and general info. A patient might not be so intimidated."

Ed Gorin, a professional writer and public relations consultant, writes the cardiology newsletter and takes photographs for it. The group posts the newsletter on its Web site

IN SUMMARY

Newsletters are a good way to inform patients about your staff and services, and attract new patients. To get started on your own newsletter, consider:

- What you want to say, and how often you want to say it. Content can highlight your staff's background and special interests, your hours, and descriptions of common medical problems you see and how you treat them. You may wish to start out with just an "occasional" publication, and move to one that comes out more regularly if you get a good reception.
- How you want to say it. The old-fashioned way is to print the newsletter and mail it to patients or to addresses in certain ZIP codes. You can purchase addresses from mailing houses. Or save money by sending your newsletter by e-mail.
- Who is going to do it. You could hire a professional writer or a newsletter company to handle all or part of the publication, or do it in-house. Either way, make sure one person is responsible but involve your staff by soliciting their support of the concept and their ideas for articles.
- Your goal is to educate and update patients, as well as attract new ones to your practice. But the newsletter can also be a vehicle to help the office run more smoothly by explaining common office policies and procedures.

Content is also pegged to the time of year. For example, the June 2005 issue carried a front-page story about male infertility (June 19 is Fathers' Day), while May had a tie-in to Mother's Day. "In May we did a story on stress, because Mother's Day is very stressful for an infertile woman," Ledbetter says.

You can also use the newsletter to advertise your "success stories," as Perloe's does. A section called "What the Patients are Saying" quotes a grateful patient recounting a happy birth.

Newsletters provide a forum for you to highlight the backgrounds and accomplishments of your office. A "meet our team" section in the reproductive group's newsletter profiles a staff member. No one is left out — administrative employees as well as physicians have been included.

Also standard in each issue is information that helps the office run more smoothly — such as how to make an appointment, and details about upcoming talks or

(www.myheartdoctors.com), mails it to patients, and keeps copies at the office.

IN THE AGE OF HIPAA

Some physicians may worry that, because of the privacy rule, a patient newsletter would be verboten. Not true. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, health plans, physicians and other covered entities are permitted to communicate with their members and patients about services offered.

SAVE CASH A newsletter sent by e-mail would be cheaper.

In a question-and-answer document, HHS addressed marketing, stating: "It would not be marketing for a physician who has developed a new anti-snore device to send a flyer describing it to all of her patients (whether or not each patient has actually sought treatment for snoring). Nor would it be marketing for an ophthalmologist or health plan to send existing patients or members discounts for eye-exams or eye-glasses available only to the patients and members."

It may be advisable to ask patients if they want to receive the newsletter, even though this is not required. Perloe's practice uses a separate form to solicit patients' e-mail addresses and their permission to receive the newsletter. He hopes to reformat the practice's intake sheet to simply add one line where patients could give their OK.

The Georgia group also uses the e-mail addresses it collects from visitors to its Web site. Every month Ledbetter sends the newsletter to about 10,000 e-mail addresses, using a very simple, inexpensive software package available for purchase commercially.

The privacy rule does not apply to persons who are not yet patients, so

a newsletter sent to a potential patient would not be covered.

The rule prohibits the release of a patient's protected health information (name, diagnosis, insurance data, etc.) but this would rarely be included in a newsletter, with the exception of items like "success stories." To include that information, be certain to obtain a signed release from the patient.

HOW TO GET STARTED

If you are interested in launching a newsletter, start by becoming more

aware of the newsletters your colleagues distribute. If you come across one you like, contact the office or writer, if one is listed. Ask around your hospital's marketing department. Most institutions have newsletters and likely can recommend ways to get started and suggest writing and marketing professionals to talk to if you don't want to go it alone.

Don't limit yourself to someone nearby: with e-mail and faxes, it may not even be necessary to work with someone in your area.

Fees vary but Gorin says he charges between \$3,000 to \$4,000 per four-page newsletter. In addition, printing and postage can add up to a cost of about \$1 per newsletter. You could write the copy and have someone with more experience edit it for you.

MGMA's Tennant estimates a newsletter could cost 50 to 75 cents per issue to produce, including printing and postage. This "can provide a good return on investment" if it produces more patient visits and use of services. "If you are trying to get the patient to do something, you would remind them to make another appointment, or say 'I encourage you to see me once or twice a year,'" he says.

Aside from writing time, a newsletter sent by e-mail would be cheaper than one that is mailed, he points out. There is no postage or printing required.

When using an outside individual, appoint one person in the practice to work as the liaison and ensure that there is agreement on content before engaging the writer or marketing firm. Samole recommends allowing enough time to do each issue right. "You need the approval of the text and articles from everyone in the group and sometimes that includes the spouses," with only one person collecting their input, he says.

Regardless of whether the newsletter is handled externally or by a staff member, encourage your whole group to generate story ideas, and have one physician agree to review the copy before it is distributed.

Perloe cautions that patients pay attention to the quality of a newsletter. It shouldn't look too "glitzy," which could give the impression that resources were used that should have gone to patient care. But it also shouldn't look too cheap, as if the practice doesn't know what quality and professionalism are.

Finally, don't forget the newsletter's purpose — promoting the practice.

"If you want to do a canned newsletter, you are handing out information that is useful, but that doesn't really help the practice," Gorin says. "If you do it yourself, you do an article that you hope will make the phone ring and bring patients in."

The cardiology group sends several thousand newsletters to patients and recently to all residents in its local ZIPcode, which Samole says cost a "nominal fee."

"It's too early to determine those results and it's too difficult to put a value on goodwill, but we do know that just few new patients does pay for the whole process," Samole says. ■

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