Expanding a private practice by fostering professional relationships

Q: I have only one referral source. I need to expand my practice. I’d like to tap into the local school district and maybe find a way to get my foot in the door of area doctors’ offices. How do I do that?

A: Each of your current clients offers a potential opportunity to expand the practice. The most obvious way is for a satisfied client to recommend your practice to others. When accepting a referral from a friend of a client or an insurance or managed care company, use “cross-pollination.” Much like cross-pollination strengthens plants, professional cross-pollination strengthens relationships between you, your clients and potential referral sources.

Make sure you coordinate with physicians, schools and even lawyers if it is appropriate, but keep in mind that these contacts always require a signed release of information. A small, limited practice can grow fairly rapidly using the cross-pollination method. Within your mandatory informed consent document, include a “coordination of treatment” clause that allows you to contact others who are involved in the care of the client. Whenever a coordination of treatment contact is made, it is a marketing opportunity. These contacts are a professional and ethical responsibility, but at the same time, they provide conduits to help you market your practice.

For example, when a client referral comes from a physician, send a thank you letter, a brochure and a business card, along with basic clinical information for the physician’s chart. A follow-up call to discuss coordination of treatment for the client is appropriate, and this also provides an opportunity to market more directly to the physician. You might also consider dropping off fruit or lunch to the physician’s staff on occasion. As you develop a relationship with the physician and staff, your name will readily come to mind whenever one of their patients needs a referral to a counselor.

If your client is a student with an educational issue, it is an excellent idea to contact the counselor, social worker or special education coordinator at the school to ask for input in treatment planning. Consider asking the student’s family if you could attend the student’s individual education plan meeting or annual review. Act as an observer at these meetings, providing input only when asked. Leaving a brochure or business card behind is usually welcome. Schools routinely look for competent counselors when they wish to refer outside the district and maintain a list of those they trust.

If the school refers a student with medical issues and the family has signed the coordination of treatment document, it is wise to contact the physician with a letter or phone call. This is a courtesy contact (which may be required by state law or a managed care contractual agreement) to let the physician know that the patient/client is being treated for attention deficit disorder, anxiety or other mental health issues.

Expanding your practice niche is working with adults, obtain client permission to contact their internist, gynecologist or other medical specialist. Because physicians usually spend an average of about seven minutes with patients, most doctors welcome a counselor ally. And when another one of their patients needs a counselor, your marketing efforts may pay off.

Developing and expanding these relationships led to one of the most encouraging comments I (Bob) ever received. A potential new client told me, “I was given your name by our school, and the next day, our pediatrician gave us your card. With those two endorsements, we feel pretty good about coming to see you.”

Q: I recently moved to Phoenix and am very interested in setting up a private practice, but I’m not sure where to start. I would like to have the practice out of my home. I am just not sure how to go about finding the rules and laws of private practice in Arizona and how to get in with insurance companies. Any information you could provide me would be greatly appreciated.

A: First, we would recommend joining your new state ACA branch organization, the Arizona Counselors Association ([azca.org]). Ask if they need help working on a committee or board. In other words, begin networking. AzCA should be able to provide a wealth of practice information and support and help guide you through the transition.

Second, contact the Board of Behavioral Health Examiners ([azbbhe@bbhe.state.az.us]) to determine your eligibility for an Arizona license. Next, call the top 20 employers in your area and find out what health insurance/managed care benefits, as well as employee assistance programs (EAPs), they offer to their employees. Then apply to be a provider for those health insurance, managed care and EAP companies. Look for an electronic mailing list or online forum of local mental health providers ([see yahoogroups.com]) that you can join. These resources can offer a glimpse of the ins and outs of private practice in your area and offer a boost to a new practice looking for referrals.

This approach is a template for moving to another state and setting up a private practice. But keep in mind that each state has its own policies and regulations. It is imperative to work with your state counseling association to ensure that you are in total compliance with all state practice laws.
Robert J. Walsh and Norman C. Dasenbrook are coauthors of The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals. ACA members can e-mail their questions to walshgasp@aol.com and access a series of “Private Practice Pointers” on the ACA website at counseling.org.

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Did you Know?
ACA members can download complete issues of Counseling Today from the website. Visit counseling.org, click on “Publications,” then click on “Counseling Today.”

A: What about advertising in the Yellow Pages? Does that generate referrals?
Q: Generally, no. The bigger ads are expensive, and you are locked into an annual contract. Few prospective counseling clients actually “let their fingers do the walking.” Think about it this way: You wouldn’t pick a neurosurgeon because you liked his/her ad in the phone book. Take the standard listing and invest your marketing money elsewhere.

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