

## 6 Advantages to Orthopedic Practices Partnering With Rehabilitation Specialists

Written by Laura Miller  
October 28, 2010

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Many orthopedic and sports medicine practices that once supplied in-office physical therapy, occupational therapy and other rehabilitative services on their own are now contracting with separate hospitals and professional groups for these services, says Diane Ryckman, director of sports medicine and orthopedic services at Kettering Medical Center in Dayton, Ohio.

These partnerships can still be convenient for patients, as many of the rehabilitative centers are located in buildings directly next to the practice, solidifying the partnership. The facilities are sometimes even in the same building, though they must have separate entrances for Medicare reimbursement, says Ms. Ryckman. Here are six advantages for orthopedic and sports medicine practices partnering with organizations that have rehabilitation services.

**1. Expands surgical and non-surgical treatment for patients.** Practice staff can quickly identify whether the patient needs to see an orthopedic surgeon or whether the patient would be best served by the rehabilitation staff upon arriving at the practice, says Ms. Ryckman. The practice staff can direct the appropriate patients to the rehabilitation specialists without having to gain a referral from the orthopedic physicians. This gives physicians more time to focus on surgical patients because they won't have to spend time in initial visits with patients who only need rehabilitation services.

Additionally, having the surgical and non-surgical treatment available to patients increase the potential referral base from primary care physicians, says Shane Mangrum, MD, a physical medicine physician at Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation in Idaho Falls.

**2. Allows patients stay close for all services.** It is important for practices to keep their patients on-site for as many steps of treatment as possible, making their practices "one-stop shops for orthopedics," says Ms. Ryckman. If the patient is able to receive diagnostic, surgical and rehabilitative treatment in the same location, he or she is more likely to feel satisfied with the experience.

**3. Provides direct communication between physicians and therapists.** The partnership promotes direct and continued communication between the physician and the therapist because their groups are in such close proximity. This is advantageous for the physician because he or she can follow the patient through rehabilitative treatment and make sure the patient receives appropriate care. This arrangement can also foster group meetings between the patient, therapist and physician to devise treatment plans.

The professionals can also devise and discuss the patient's treatment plan more easily in person. "If therapists have a question, they can walk upstairs or next door and ask the physician directly," says Pat Hinton, executive director of the Jacksonville (Fla.) Orthopaedic Institute. "Rehabilitation is a very large and significant contributor to a patient's outcome."

**4. Standardizes treatment process.** Physicians partnering with therapists know what to expect from their patient's rehabilitation treatment. Physicians and therapists should create a standardized process for treatment to reduce the variability of outcomes and ensure the best possible outcome every time, says Ms. Ryckman. Additionally, if the physician is familiar with a therapist or group of therapists, he or she is able to confidently send patients to rehabilitation.

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**5. Enhances physician extension services.** Some practices hire athletic trainers certified in the physician extender role, which means they are qualified to see the patients for initial assessments and assist the physician in the operating room. "Athletic trainers have musculoskeletal training and evaluation skills," says Robb S. Rehberg, PhD, ATC, partner with The Rehberg Konin Group in Wayne, NJ. "They are already speaking the physician's language."

Athletic trainers can also conduct follow-up appointments, giving the physician more time to spend in surgery. Under these arrangements, "physicians are spending less time with the patients but the patients are still getting quality care," says Mr. Rehberg. In addition to the clinical work, physician extenders can also help with practice administrative work, such as billing and coding responsibilities.

**6. Extends awareness of the practice.** Physical therapy and athletic training services often hold community outreach programs, such as injury clinics, to treat young and amateur athletes for non-surgical injuries. Practice physicians can collaborate with the rehabilitation specialists during these clinics to further associate the practice with active individuals and potential patients. If an athlete with a more serious injury arrives at the clinic, the rehabilitation specialists can also refer the patient to the orthopedic practice.

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