

Protocol for a Successful Associateship

Today's chiropractic graduates have many options open to them upon graduation. There are postgraduate degree and certification courses in various specialties in which they can enroll if they want to continue their education. There are also opportunities in the fields of education and research. However, for most DC's, going into clinical practice will be the first option.

The new practitioner who decides to go into practice has one of three alternatives: to start a solo practice, to join a group practice, or to become an associate in an established practice. While statistics vary from region to region and from one graduating class to another, it is likely that as many as half of those receiving DC degrees take the third of these alternatives and seek employment in an established chiropractic practice for a period of a year or more after graduation.

There are many reasons for starting one's professional career as an associate. First, there are the economic concerns. The burden of student loans and the enormous costs associated with establishing a practice can make it financially unrealistic to start a solo practice immediately after graduating.

Also, setting up a practice is complex and demanding and most new practitioners are not adequately prepared to deal with non-clinical concerns and need time to learn the ropes before going solo. Working as an associate provides an opportunity to learn and become more comfortable with state laws, government health care programs and the intricacies of dealing with the insurance industry. These factors, in combination, contribute to a situation where an associateship is an attractive alternative to independent practice for the newly graduated doctor of chiropractic.

As a professional society, the International Chiropractors Association (ICA) has a legitimate interest in the business structure and the organization of health care delivery by the chiropractic profession. The effect this structure may have on the status, independence and professional integrity of the doctor of chiropractic is of vital concern to the ICA.

The relationship of employer and employee is the responsibility of the parties involved, and the International Chiropractors Association does not presume to dictate or enforce obligations on the part of either party in an associate business relationship. However, the ICA recognizes a responsibility to assist the graduate doctor interested in employment establish a firm basis for a fair and productive relationship.

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However, the primary element required for the successful execution of any business contract or agreement is the goodwill of the parties involved. Disputes and other negative potentials can be minimized by determining in advances, and with a written agreement detailing the professional, technical, business and ethical aspects of the relationship. This known, agreed framework within which the operating parameters of both parties are clearly identified can prevent misunderstandings which could create an environment not conducive to effective patient care.

To this end, the ICA offers to the chiropractic profession the following guidelines. These guidelines are intended only to serve as a basis for discussions between doctors interested in establishing a fair, honorable,

professionally fulfilling and economically rewarding associateship relationship.

GUIDELINES FOR THE ASSOCIATE DOCTOR

The new practitioner can find employment as an associate through different sources: Classified ads in chiropractic state association publications, national chiropractic magazines and newspapers, personal contacts, on websites, or by advertising your interest in the any of the above publications or on chiropractic websites.

Finding an associate position is not difficult, but the newly graduated DC, anxious to start practicing, often finds out too late that the position isn't quite what he/she expected.

The first rule when seeking an associate position is not to accept any offer or opportunity immediately. Though no one can be sure how any job will turn out, you have a better chance of establishing a successful associate relationship if you take the time and effort to clarify certain facts before making a decision.

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Practice organization

Before considering any associateship offer, visit the employer-doctor's clinic. Since you will be spending most of your working hours on these premises, it should be an office where you will be comfortable. Ask the doctor to show you around and explain to you the organization of the practice. Ask questions, and try to meet the staff members. Arrange a visit on a working day. If you and the employer-doctor are anxious to make this relationship work, you will find a time suitable for both of you.

Licensing requirement

Every state has its own licensing and registration laws and regulations. Make sure you comply with the requirements of the jurisdiction in which you are seeking to practice. Be prepared to supply documentary evidence of this to the employer upon request. If you need a certain number of credits to get relicensed, ask the employing doctor what provision and/or allowances he/she can make for you to complete this requirement.

References

At the time of the interview, the employing doctor may also require you to provide him/her with your educational transcript. Be prepared to do this. Also, prepare a list of appropriate references with addresses and phone numbers (your instructors are acceptable) prior to seeking employment. When and if the employing doctor wants refer-

ences you will have them ready. This could be a factor in your favor and present you as an organized person.

Compensation

Salaries may vary from state to state and practice to practice, both in dollar amounts and in the exact formula on which compensation is to be based. You could be offered an annual salary with/without benefits, based on a minimum number of work hours a week. Or you could be offered a base salary supplemented by a percentage of the income you bring into the practice. If you are offered a percentage of the income, ask the doctor approximately how much he/she expects this would be. If you feel the offer is inadequate, let the employer know what you think are fair wages. It is not unreasonable to require a fixed dollar amount as a minimum or basic weekly or monthly salary. There needs to be a realistic basis on which you can plan financially. Try to negotiate with the addition of benefits which are important to you, vacation or personal leave or overtime.

Once you agree to the compensation offered, you are bound to those terms for the duration of your agreement. You must not let an unsatisfactory compensation situation affect your care of patients and your professional conduct. Take time to discuss this important aspect of your employment, keeping in mind that the employing doctor has already invested a lot of money establishing the practice and you can learn from his/her professional and business experience. Your decision should be based on whether the compensation is fair in comparison to your responsibilities and the practical experience you will be gaining by working in that practice.

Practice philosophy

Every doctor has his/her own business and practice philosophy and as the owner, the employing doctor has the right to run the practice according to his/her personal wishes. When asked questions about your personal philosophy, techniques or procedures, be honest. Don't say what you think he/she wants to hear. It could lead to complications later on and affect patient care. It's important that you and the employing doctor are compatible on major issues. If the differences are only minor, try to reach a compromise.

Once you have discussed the practice philosophy and are clear about the procedures utilized by the employing practice, you are obligated to abide by them. Don't assume that after you join the practice you will initiate major changes. It won't happen, and you shouldn't attempt to do this. It is unfair to the doctor who hired you with the understanding that you would follow the procedures as he/she explained them to you.

Professional obligations

You should make every effort to bring to the employing practice your best professional efforts by applying the knowledge and training you learned in school. It is also your duty to continuously seek to improve your skills and competency by keeping abreast of current literature and research. Talk to the employing doctor about the possibility of attending continuing chiropractic educational programs.

An associateship offers an excellent opportunity to learn by observation and par-