

e Skin & Allergy News

The Leading Independent Newspaper for the Dermatologist

January 2005 • Volume 36 • Number 1

Practice Trends

Managing Your Dermatology Practice

The Horizontal Filing Cabinet

Joseph S. Eastern, M.D.



DR. EASTERN practices dermatology and dermatologic surgery in Belleville, N.J. To respond to this column, write Dr. Eastern at our editorial offices or e-mail him at sknews@elsevier.com.

Do you have stacks and stacks of “important” tasks piled on your desk? If so, you're far from alone. A majority of the physicians' desktops I've seen are littered with letters, folders, journals, charts, mail, books, and other paraphernalia, often several inches deep.

This is all important stuff, those doctors insist. And all of it has to be on top of the desk, in plain sight, so they won't forget to attend to it. I call such arrangements “horizontal file cabinets,” and here's my question: If all that stuff is so important, why has it been sitting there, untouched, for months?

Chances are, when you finally go through it, you'll find that most of it isn't that important at all. Or it may have been important at one time, but the deadline for completing it has long since passed. Or it may still be important, but it should be done as soon as possible. Like 3 weeks ago.

Horizontal filing cabinets are an esthetic and organizational nightmare. (“Don't worry,” I can hear you saying, “I know where everything is on my desk.” No, you don't.) And all those piles make completion of current projects that much more difficult by taking up all the usable desk space!

Transforming your horizontal filing cabinet into an efficient and useful desktop isn't that difficult, or even that time consuming. But you have to make yourself an appointment several hours long, and you have to make sure you keep the appointment. Make sure you will not be disturbed. Put the phones on service. You'll need a *large* wastebasket and a box of manila folders, and you'll need to free up space in a *real* file cabinet nearby. (I prefer lateral files because they are easier to

build into office cabinetry and all of the contents are immediately visible when you open the drawer, but a vertical file will do.)

Now go through each and every piece of paper, book, magazine, pamphlet, and reminder note on your desk. As you look at each one, ask yourself which of the following three categories it belongs in:

▶Is it trash?

▶Is it delegatable?

▶Is it a task you must do personally?

The first category will probably be the largest, and you know what to do with it. Notice that there is no category for “file and forget.” A full 80% of the “important” papers you file away for some vague future use will never be looked at again. Don't save anything just for the sake of saving it. Be merciless with each and every document. If it does not require action on someone's part, and if it contains information that is readily available elsewhere, throw it away!

Everything that can be delegated should be, immediately. Physicians often have a problem delegating—they're convinced no one can do any job as well as they can—but the fact is that any task that does not require a medical license is probably delegatable. Get it to the proper desk and leave it there, with any necessary instructions and a deadline. (Deadlines are excellent tools for focusing attention and encouraging prompt action.)

That leaves only the tasks you must do yourself. Resist the temptation to do them immediately. Instead, prepare a folder, properly labeled and with a deadline, for each one. File the folders, in order of deadlines, with the most urgent first, in your file cabinet.

Now you have a clean work surface. From now on, only one project—the most urgent one in the file drawer—should be on your desk at any given time. Everything else will be waiting its turn, out of sight, in your file cabinet.

Every new item that arrives on your desk should be placed in one of the same three categories: to do, to delegate, or to throw away.

Avoid the temptation to procrastinate by putting it over in the corner, “to do later.” Without an established priority or a deadline, it's not going to get done. And that, after all, is how you ended up with a horizontal filing cabinet in the first place.