

By Ed Rabinowitz, Monday, June, 21st, 2010

Itâ€™s About Time to Maximize Your Time

Singer/songwriter Jim Croce wanted to save time in a bottle. Rock band Chicago asked, "Does anybody really know what time it is?" And the progressive rock band Rush wrote that "Time Stands Still." The harsh reality, however, is that time does not stand still. Rather, it's a most fleeting commodity.

And for physicians, time could be their most important asset.

So the question becomes: How do you maximize time? Or perhaps more appropriately, how do you know when you're not maximizing time?

"I think one of the first signs would be a feeling that things are spinning out of control," says Dan Markovitz, president of [TimeBack Management](#), a time-management and productivity consulting firm that specializes in the needs of healthcare professionals. "There's a constant feeling of, 'Did I take care of that? Did I call that patient back?' Those questions are indicators that time is not being spent wisely."

Necessary Adjustments

Markovitz explains that "physicians are self-selected" to serve the public, to save lives. As such, it's not easy for them to walk out of the office at five or six in the evening and say, okay, now I'm going to take care of me. "It feels like an abdication of their responsibility," he says. But he points out that there's a reason why flight attendants on planes tell passengers to put the oxygen mask over their own mouth before helping their children. "If you can't take care of yourself, you can't take care of the people who are important to you," Markovitz says.

For starters, Markovitz suggests physicians start living in their calendar, not their inbox. Instead of keeping email open on your computer, keep your calendar front and center. If you use Outlook, change the settings so that the calendar opens first rather than the email inbox. That way, the first thing you'll see in the morning is what you're supposed to do that day.

Markovitz also says that in order to reduce interruptions, give staff manila folders in which to store any questions. Then, meet with them once or twice a day to review those questions. "[A physician's] administrative staff is afraid that if they don't ask the question right now, they're going to forget it," he says. "But if you give them a place to hold those questions or ideas, they can put them aside because they're secure in the knowledge that they'll be talking with the doctor later." Short of an emergency, the pressure to interrupt is removed.

What about delegating staff to handle some things for you? Markovitz says that most physicians -- whether in private practice or a hospital setting -- have that level of support. The problem is that they don't know how to use it. "Doctors spend years in training to be physicians, but no one ever teaches them how to manage people and delegate work," he says. The result is that staff often is underutilized.

Gaining Assistance

Charles Crutchfield III, MD, is the principal of Eagan, Minnesota-based [Crutchfield Dermatology, P.A.](#) About four years ago, Crutchfield did something in his practice that changed his life: He hired a personal assistant.

"She keeps my calendar, handles all my appointments, and anyone who is trying to get to me has to go through her first," Crutchfield

says. Kelley, his assistant, also picks up his dry cleaning, has his car washed twice a week, and runs the kind of errands that might otherwise take him an additional hour to handle on the way home. "I can go home [after work] and play with my kids and see my wife," Crutchfield says. "It's amazing."

Kelley now handles "all the stuff" he used to try to fit in between patients. He also keeps a tape recorder with him at all times. When Crutchfield thinks of something that has to be done, he says it into the recorder. The next morning, Kelley listens to the tape to determine what needs to be handled that day. "The key is finding someone who has an impeccable record and good references," Crutchfield says, adding that he or she also needs to be highly organized.

For physicians who might say they don't have enough "stuff" to keep an assistant busy full-time, Crutchfield suggests either hiring a part-timer or sharing a full-time assistant other physicians, if you're working in a group. The cost? About \$15 an hour, or \$30,000 a year, for a recent college graduate. But the doctor emphasizes that it's not about the money. "You will find out just how much quality time you have," he says. "It's invaluable."