

Medical practices are not only small businesses, but complex operations that provide a vital service to their community. The consequences of a poorly managed practice can be extremely serious.

For GPs who also own a practice, effectively managing the people they have employed is one of the key aspects of ensuring a successful and safe business.

The eighth module in the RACGP's *General practice management toolkit* (the Toolkit) is designed to provide GP-owners with the skills necessary to best manage the staff members in their practice.

The *Managing people* module includes information on areas such as recruitment, employment contracts, staff induction, training and development, managing problems, rewarding staff members, and occupational health and safety.

Once they have completed the module, GP-owners will be able to understand the process of recruiting and selecting staff members; recognise steps for introducing new staff members to the work environment; discuss and develop policies and procedures for managing staff performance; and identify responsibilities and issues in workplace safety.

There are many reasons for GP-owners to pay keen attention to managing people,' Dr Neville Steer, practice owner and key GP author of the Toolkit, told Good Practice



'Teamwork between GPs, practice nurses and other staff members requires a range of people skills that contribute to better performance within the practice.'

According to Dr Steer, one of the best examples of an important role within a practice lies at the front desk, making it fundamental that the GP-owner manage the people involved.

'Patients' initial experience, and therefore first impression, of a practice is not the GP, but the medical reception staff,' he said. 'The reception staff members represent the public face of the practice.'

'Well-trained reception staff members who have good people skills set a positive tone for the health appointment.'

In the event a staff member is not performing their role to satisfaction, Dr Steer suggests GPs may in fact be hampered by their professional inclinations and suggests a straightforward approach.

'One of the difficult problems for GP-owners to address is when an employee is not meeting expectations for performance,' he said. 'GPs by nature can be more sensitive to peoples' emotional experiences than the average business owner.'

'Telling a person that their performance is unsatisfactory is a difficult conversation and may be deferred longer than appropriate.'

'Continuous monitoring and feedback of performance is better than waiting for an annual review or allowing a situation to deteriorate until it becomes a major issue.'

### **Matters of employment**

Given the fact GPs often don't have a background in business training and management, issues related to staff contracts can be a particularly tricky area for practice owners.

'Owners need to be aware of the regulatory requirements in employing people,' Dr Steer said. 'This

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also requires careful documentation to demonstrate that correct processes are followed in any matters relating to performance.'

The *Managing people* module contains a broad range of information related to employment contracts, including offering a position and required contract regulations, such as hours of work, parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and many others.

In addition to the information available in the *Managing people* module, Dr Steer recommends GP-owners engage external experts if they are still unsure of any specific areas of a contract.

'Determining whether a doctor is an employee or an independent contractor, for example, can be an area of

debate,' he said. 'Employing doctors is a complex process and, where possible, contracts should be reviewed by a legal adviser familiar with employment law'.

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