

Shekhar Challa, M.D. – The Elements of an Innovative Practice

By Jeanie Erwin

The foundation for every medical advance is thinking outside the normal perimeters to something that just beyond reach, and stretching until it is attainable. Nowhere has that proven to be truer than in medicine. Despite the many challenges that physicians and their practices face in the health care system today, there are also amazing opportunities to develop new models of service.

Shekhar Challa, M.D., medical practitioner with 20 years of distinguished service, award-winning author, entrepreneur and co-founder of Kansas Medical Clinic (KMC), a multispecialty clinic with four locations and one of the area's leaders in gastroenterology, feels that every area of medicine deserves an innovative and informed approach. In today's health care landscape, it is imperative to consider every aspect of the practice, including the business end. "With increasing overheads every year, the average practice can only survive if it can change with the changing demands and challenges and start to incorporate new ways of doing business," Dr. Challa says. He is also an early adopter of nutraMetrix, a relatively new division of Market America, which sells nutraceuticals only to physicians who in turn market to their patients. This is a business model that is spreading throughout the country.

While it is the priority of medical schools to produce highly skilled physicians, it does not give medical professionals a firm foundation in the inner workings of the health care system. According to Dr. Challa, being informed and involved beyond the medical headlines is essential in offering patients the best possible care. It is not necessary to know every detail, but it is necessary to surround yourself with educated support. "If you do not know the answer, do not hesitate to ask for help in understanding." Dr. Challa continues, "There are many consulting firms to help with contracts and in dealing with various insurance companies." He also asserts that understanding the workings of various insurance companies is a huge asset in being an effective patient advocate. In the jungle of government bureaucracy and political forces that shape health care, no physician can afford to ignore the important business aspect of their practice.

As patients face increasing obstacles to obtain affordable health care, no longer can you open a practice and simply wait for patients to come. Dr. Challa, who founded Osteoporosis Services, the largest mobile bone density testing company in the Midwest, which provides services to more than 150 rural hospitals, suggests branding your practice and specializing in specific diseases in your field. The success and expansion of Dr. Challa's medical practice has much to do with what we can refer to as "Brand Challa." Dr. Challa says, "The difference between surviving and thriving in clinical practice is not only being a 'good doctor,' but also understanding the business side of medicine." Health care is now big business with contract negotiations, increasing government policies and a myriad of insurance companies often creating confusion for patients and physicians alike. Dr. Challa addresses this head on by managing his practice from a business perspective and finding answers by surrounding himself with a strong administrative team, and suggests taking business classes to learn more about clinic management. "My staff is my biggest asset and their expertise assists me in making wise business decisions."

Other key aspects of Brand Challa we observed are his relationships, community exposure and name recognition. With the increase of patients researching medical conditions on the Internet, Dr. Challa says, "Physicians must keep abreast of changes in medicine and technology, and don't hesitate to think outside the box." He also recommends to physicians interested in growing their patient base and increasing referrals to get their names out in the community and take the time to build relationships.

Here are just a few of the tips Dr. Challa suggests to help "brand yourself":

- Lean the business side of medicine through books, Internet and classes.

- Build a strong infrastructure of business minds for your practice.
- Serve on local community boards and service organizations.
- Personalize your interactions with hospital staff including administrators.
- Meet and build contacts with local media and become a resource for them.
- Speak at local corporations to employees, your local library or community centers.
- Research an area of public health interest and write articles or, better still, author a book that speaks to the patient.

Of course, none of this matters unless you have a passion for healing and improving patients' quality of life. Dr. Challa makes a point of getting to know the social side of his patients by keeping a "make their day" page in his charts. This is used to notate personal aspects of a patient's lifestyle and helps him and staff interconnect with repeat patients. "When you wake up in the morning, think of what motivates you and why you chose this noble profession... for the people you interact with and can help every day.

"Keep an open mind in adopting new technologies and introducing them into your practice." Recently, Dr. Challa founded *G-EyeMobile*, the first mobile gastrointestinal diagnostic team in the country. "If you want to reach people to help and heal, you need to think beyond the walls of your practice," he says. The mobile service brings on-site testing to rural physician offices and hospitals that do not have access to the latest in gastrointestinal diagnostics such as: wireless small bowel capsule endoscopy, which views three areas of the small bowel; 24-hour pH monitoring system using Restech catheter, which is used to investigate for atypical acid reflux disease; lactulose breath test to diagnose small intestine bacterial overgrowth, which may cause recurrent IBS symptoms; H. Pylori breath test, which is used to detect active *Helicobacter Pylori* bacteria; and lactose breath test to diagnose lactose intolerance. Specializing allows physicians to become more thoroughly involved in the latest technologies and stay excited about what they do. "What excites me in my field are newer technologies like the wireless capsule small bowel endoscopy. It is amazing how far technology has taken us," Dr. Challa explains, "This is essentially a camera inside of a capsule which, when swallowed, goes through your small bowel over several hours and transmits 58,000 still pictures which we can review later. I believe the colon capsule will be available in less than two years." Innovating new approaches allows a doctor to reach people he may not have otherwise. "Even though *G-EyeMobile* is a new effort, we are already seeing positive results. Recently, we did a wireless small bowel capsule endoscopy on a patient. Even though small bowel cancers are rare, we were able to diagnose it by small bowel capsule endoscopy while traditional X-rays had missed it. We sent the patient for surgery and the cancer was localized and had not spread. We are having several doctors commending our efforts, as these tests are not available in the rural Midwest.

"Medicine is also about informing the public," Dr. Challa says. "Patients cannot benefit from what they do not know to seek out, or avoid because they incomplete or misinformation." Dr. Challa, who is an award-winning author of *Spurn the Burn* and *Winning the Hepatitis-C Battle*, feels that another important aspect of a highly successful practice is reaching your patients with information. "I often tell people about the importance of screening for the prevention of colon cancer. Colon cancer is 90% preventable and 90% curable if detected early with screening. So, get screened – have a colonoscopy when you turn 50, or sooner if you are having problems." According to Dr. Challa, many people avoid colonoscopies because of a perceived discomfort or embarrassment. "Finding new and creative ways to informing patients and putting them to ease is important in helping them overcome those obstacles to receive possibly lifesaving diagnostics." He suggests writing books, articles and brochures to hand to patients as additional resources. "It builds patient relationships and trust. When a patient feels that you are reaching out beyond what is expected, they are more likely to follow through with your recommendations."

Although practicing medicine is very busy in itself, according to Dr. Challa, the changing climate of medicine demand sbeing involved in the community locally, nationally and internationally, when possible. Dr. Challa, who has lectured nationally and internationally on acid reflux disease and other gastrointestinal and liver topics, as well as being a featured speaker for the Chronic Liver Disease Foundation, also serves on several corporate boards around the U.S. and abroad. "Disseminating and receiving information is what drives progress in medical research,"

he says. Dr. Challa also developed the Clinical Research Division of KMC and has served as principal investigator of 17 clinical research trials since 2001. “I am passionate in pursuing research which affords patients the opportunity of medication prior to reaching the market,” he says. Clinical research also allows physicians to gain access to new research treatments and contribute to the medical future.

Another crucial element in a successful practice is a highly motivated staff that loves what they do. “I consider my staff the most important element in my practice. My staff is excellent. They strongly believe in customer service,” he says. Maintaining an enthusiastic work environment is vital not only to the success of the practice but also ensuring that patients get the time and care that they need. “We employ the ‘FISH’ philosophy at KMC,” says Dr. Challa. “It’s an inspired, ongoing journey that changes the way we approach our patients and ourselves.” KMC launched the FISH program at the 10th annual KMC holiday party, held December 14, 2007. Every KMC employee received their own personal copy of the *FISH Philosophy* book authored by Stephen C. Lindin, Ph.D.; Harry Paul; and John Christenson. It is the story of Seattle’s world-famous Pike Place Fish Market. It inspires thoughts and ideas of how to see your work environment get energized and change for the better. Each center within KMC has a FISH committee. This is a safe environment where all ideas are welcome and brainstorming develops into implementation. Committees meet to discuss the four principles of the fish philosophy: play, make their day, be there and choose your attitude. Dr. Challa suggests utilizing these simple principles to energize the workplace and maximize your effectiveness with your patients.

As you enter your place of work, please CHOOSE to make today a great day. Your colleagues, patients, team members and you yourself will be thankful.

Find ways to PLAY. We can be serious about our work without being serious about ourselves.

Stay focused in order to BE THERE when your patients and team members most need you.

And should you feel your energy lapsing, try this surefire remedy: find someone who needs a helping hand, a word of support or a good ear and MAKE THEIR DAY!

The staff at KMC have found creative ways to implement the program. To encourage playfulness, they added a bright décor to the office, as well as a dry erase board to the hall, which encourages creativity. Fun music plays throughout the office and exam rooms, and when “their song” comes on, the staff breaks out into a full-fledged singalong! The exam rooms are stocked with crayons and patients of all ages are encouraged, “Until the doctor comes a-calling, take a crayon and make a drawing. Table paper oh so white, color it until it’s bright!” They are even framing a couple of patient masterpieces for display. For KMC, the very core of health care is care itself.

After traversing medical school and residency, doctors must navigate the complex business aspects of health. Medical professionals cannot solely concern themselves with the day to day or stay in the protected confines of clinical work. Instead of being dismayed by the world of medicine as it is today, it is important to stay open to changes and aware of the real-world needs of the people you are choosing to serve. Dr. Challa reminds, “Be informed, involved and never underestimate the importance of your staff. By surrounding yourself with great staff support, you make a great practice.” Dr. Challa chooses medicine because he had a deep desire to help and heal people. It is a high calling with great rewards, and sometimes great frustrations. To overcome the inherent hurdles you must “Strive to be exceptional. Make your practice worth talking about,” Dr. Challa says. According to Dr. Challa, “Not everything about medicine is clinical, but it must always be about the patients.” There is a business side of medicine, but for Dr. Challa, it is certainly not business as usual.