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Locum Tenens: A Win-Win for VA and Primary Care Physicians

In the fall of 2007, Dr. Joseph Lalka took a long, hard look at the balance sheet for his private practice in small town Chatham, New York. The bottom line was heartbreaking. After 26 years of serving more than 3,000 patients, he could no longer make ends meet.

For years, primary care providers' costs have been escalating while reimbursements for their services have been declining. That year, for example, Dr. Lalka's malpractice insurance had climbed by 17 percent and his nurses' health insurance was up by 20 percent. At the same time, Medicare reimbursements were down by 10 percent and private insurance companies had cut back significantly on the amounts they were willing to pay.

He literally couldn't afford to continue operating his practice. At 54 years old, he and his wife needed to think about retirement, yet his income had dwindled.

Dr. Lalka closed up shop and began a Locum Tenens career. He started with a private sector placement agency and took a hospitalist position at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Concord Hospital in New Hampshire, followed by a second assignment at the North Shore Medical Center in Massachusetts.

For six months, Dr. Lalka worked weekdays and drove home on the weekends. Then he jumped on a Locum Tenens opportunity in July 2008 at the VA outpatient clinic in Catskill, New York.

"It was only 20 miles away from my home, and I was interested in working with VA's Computerized Patient Record System. I'd had something like it in my private practice since 1994."

It only took a few months for Dr. Lalka to realize that a permanent position at the Catskill VA clinic was the best answer for his family. "My wife wanted me to be at home rather than jumping around the country."

Full time since January 2009, he says taking the position was the right move.

"Coming in as a locum allowed me to test drive being here. The Veterans are very nice, and it's fulfilling to serve those who have served our Nation. The staff here is great – I have wonderful working relationships. Plus, even though we're in rural America, I don't feel isolated. Any time I have a problem case, I have a whole support network through VA's information technologies."

Now that VA is launching its own Locum Tenens Program, Dr. Lalka says he can definitely see how it will be a win-win situation for both VA and the primary care doctors who sign on.

Locum Tenens

"It will take a tremendous burden off the system to have a corps of doctors ready to fill in for extended vacations, maternity leaves, or hard-to-fill positions in rural areas."

Dr. Lalka says that the salary might seem somewhat lower than private sector locum opportunities, but he explains that you have to factor in the benefits.

"Most private agencies give you no health benefits at all. You are an independent contractor. You have to figure out how to get coverage, and you have to pay for it."

In fact, full-time VA Locum Tenens professionals earn a Federal benefits package that's similar to taking a permanent position at VA, in addition to a comprehensive travel package that includes paid travel expenses, lodging, meals, and incidentals.

"The benefits are very good, plus you'll accrue seniority and participate in the Federal retirement program."

Employment benefits aside, Dr. Lalka says the most rewarding aspects of a Locum Tenens position at VA are all related to the kind of medicine you can practice.

"Working with the Veterans, talking about their experiences, helping them understand their different diseases or apply a diet program – those are the kinds of things that attracted me to primary care to begin with. Plus, it's pretty neat to be able to order an MRI without jumping through five different people's hoops to get it approved."

He says VA Locum Tenens doctors will be able to enjoy all the benefits of traveling and at the same time leave many private sector stresses behind.

"The motive here is not a profit motive. There's no goal to churn in and churn out. More importantly, you don't have to practice defensive medicine here like in the private sector."

Like all VA physicians, VA Locum Tenens professionals are entitled to immunity from medical malpractice claims as provided by the Federal Tort Claims Act.

"Even in private sector locum practice where the agency covered my malpractice insurance, I still had worry. I don't feel that worry any more."

Finally, Dr. Lalka says since VA's Computerized Patient Record System is networked across all medical facilities nationwide, Locum Tenens providers will move easily from assignment to assignment.

"I had to learn something new in New Hampshire and then something entirely new again in Massachusetts. Here they'll have all the benefits of traveling yet still be working within the same system."

For more information about VA Locum Tenens opportunities, visit our Web site at www.VAcareers.va.gov/LocumTenens or call the Program Office at 1-866-664-1030 or 1-602-626-7947.