

Shifting the mindsight behind how we practice medicine

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Trevor Cabrera, MD

Although most in the healthcare industry have heard of travel nursing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, a lesser-known field of medicine is the world of locum tenens. Like travel nursing, locum tenens encompasses physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners who work in temporary assignments around the country. A Latin phrase coined by healthcare staffing agency CHG Healthcare in 1972, “locum tenens” means “to hold in place of” or “one holding a place”; and contrary to popular beliefs, this musty Latin term has the potential to spark a larger cultural shift in how we practice medicine in the future.

It’s never easy navigating the workforce fresh out of residency, and with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, many pediatricians were faced with a growing paucity of work. As my peers were seeking out jobs in academia, private practice, and fellowship training, I drew up blueprints to walk an uncommon path toward exclusive work in locum tenens. From my perspective, jumping into the market of locum tenens was akin to entering an underground society of traveling doctors targeted at helping to fill gaps in

healthcare throughout the United States.

While my colleagues were settling into their new careers, I was busy obtaining multiple state licenses and preparing to broaden my experiences through working in myriad healthcare facilities, geographic locations, and various practice settings. To deepen my medical experiences and continue down the path of eternal education, I sought out work in some of the most isolated spots in the country. From the desert of New Mexico to the greater plains of North Dakota, to the lakes of Central Maine, the more I practiced in these rural areas, it became clear that these are the regions most in need of providers. According to the AAMC, “Of the more than 7,200 federally designated health professional shortage areas, 3 out of 5 are in rural regions. And while 20% of the U.S. population lives in rural communities, only 11% of physicians practice in such areas.”

As I traveled from job to job, acquiring new skills, new connections, and reaching a level of flexibility that historically doesn’t exist in medicine, it allowed me to appreciate the ever-changing landscape of hospital needs and how I could use my skills to help meet them.

Locum tenens work has given me the ability to create my own schedule. While I could have easily chosen a life of frequent vacations, I instead chose to maximize my work schedule, navigating from one assignment to the next. In February 2020, I sold 80% of my belongings, moved the remainder back to my mother's house in California, and gave up my "home base" entirely. With no rent or utilities and most expenses reimbursed by my agency, locum tenens has allowed me to pay off medical school loans at five times the speed of my colleagues, all while quenching my growing wanderlust to travel around the country. In less than three years after residency graduation, I will be loan free — seven years sooner than had I sought public service loan forgiveness.

In 2021, I traveled a total of 320 days across multiple states and hospitals, covering for facilities awaiting permanent providers, clinicians on maternity leave and vacations, and

physicians who are constantly overworked. I quickly learned the art of business negotiations, the variations in hospital contracts, the ins and outs of an organization's infrastructure — essentially, the parts of medicine that are often not taught in medical training.

Locum tenens is not for everyone, but it does provide a meaningful alternative to traditional workplace settings in medicine that are prone to provider burnout, constant employee turnover, and a loss of focus as to why we went into medicine in the first place. While my peers have found themselves navigating the complexities of a singular job, I have already navigated working in over a dozen hospitals and clinics. I have learned flexibility, fostered exploration, and experienced compounding personal and professional growth. Today, I am proud to call myself The Nomadic Pediatrician and look optimistically toward the future of locum tenens and where it may take me. ■

Primary care physicians rank high on list of most used locum tenens staff

Richard Payerchin

Primary care physicians and hospitalists were among the most used locum tenens doctors in hospitals, medical groups and other settings in the last year, according to a new survey.

A full 88% of health care facilities used temporary physicians and other medical staff to supplement existing staff in the last 12 months, according to the AMN Healthcare 2022 Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends. On May 31, the Dallas, Texas-based staffing company published its report on responses from 202 hospital, medical group and health care facility managers.

Among those, 70% said they use locum tenens workers to maintain services while health system leaders seek to fill openings in permanent staff rosters. Primary care physicians, including family medicine physicians, internal medicine physicians and pediatricians, were used in 21% of health care facilities in the last 12 months.

An additional 20% used locum tenens nurse practitioners and 12% used temporary physician assistants for primary care, indicating that primary care is shifting from doctors to those

medical workers, according to the survey.

"A long-standing shortage of physicians, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19, has made locum tenens physicians an even more essential part of delivering quality care at most hospitals in the United States," said Jeff Decker, Division President of Locum Tenens at AMN Healthcare. "They are part of an increasingly flexible healthcare workforce that can be mobile and able to deliver care when and where they are needed most."

Estimating current and future demand, 25% of health care facilities are seeking primary care physicians, including family practitioners, internists and pediatricians, and 21% seeking hospitalists. Both those figures were down 31% and 27%, respectively, from the 2019 survey.

Reasons for locum tenens

Along with filling in open slots, the survey reported the most popular reasons for using locum tenens staff was to meet rising patient demand (25%), fill in during peak usage times

(23%), and address physician and staff burnout (13%).

The greatest benefits of using locum tenens physicians were allowing continual treatment of patients (66%), immediate availability of providers (56%), and preventing existing staff burnout (35%). Cost was the greatest drawback, according to 85% of managers, and other main drawbacks were lack of familiarity with departments and practices (53%) and credentialing issues (46%).

To address physician and staff shortages, 54% of health care system managers said they will implement incentives such as signing and referral bonuses. The survey reported 43% will hire additional staff, 35% will expand telehealth and 33% will start retention strategies, such as bonuses, for current staff.

Pandemic effects

The primary care physicians ranked fourth on the list of most used medical staff behind anesthesiologists and certified registered nurse anesthetists (28%), hospitalists (25%) and behavioral health specialists (23%).

The report said those figures reflected effects of the pandemic:

- Medical procedures requiring anesthesia rebounded from COVID-19 related lows
- Hospitalists had greater workloads due to COVID-19 patients
- The pandemic likely worsened a shortage of behavioral health specialists. ■

Reasons why unhappy doctors stay in their jobs too long

The reality is that if you are miserable at work, it's very difficult to be happy at home.

Suneel Dhand, M.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic has (temporarily) put a pause on the avalanche of concerns about physician burnout and job dissatisfaction. Before 2020, online medical sites were awash with articles about all the changes that have been inflicted upon doctors in this new age of being employed by large healthcare organizations and being overwhelmed by bureaucratic requirements. In fact, over half of all doctors were already reporting feeling burned out—including a staggering 80 percent of all primary care physicians.

Many medical professionals who have dutifully stepped up to their calling in dealing with the COVID-19 surges haven't had a moment to catch their breath. But the truth of the matter is that this pandemic will be over one day (hopefully sooner than we think). What will happen afterwards when doctors realize that all of those issues that they were unhappy about, are still there?

The cold hard truth is that way too many physicians have been stuck in jobs that they dislike—for way too long. It's a shame that after so many years of dedicated training to reach their dream of becoming a doctor, with such intelligence and

talent, any physician would feel trapped in a job. Here are 3 of the biggest reasons why:

Family commitments. Once you have a steady job and income stream, settled in an area, and have children in school, it seems almost impossible to uproot yourself. You are otherwise happy with your house and your kids seem to be doing well. It's too much of a change to switch jobs!

Debt. You have a ton of debt right now. Added to your astronomical medical school loans, are your hefty mortgage payments. You are keeping afloat with some room for luxuries. Now is not the time in life to take risk! Are you insane suggesting I can just up and leave my secure job?

Better the devil you know. I know other physicians in my specialty, and most of them are miserable with certain aspects of their jobs too. I am used to this hospital and clinic, know how things work, and have formed relationships with all my colleagues. I'm in my comfort zone in this place. ■

Locum tenens alleviates burnout for physicians

Colin Zhu, DO

The shortage of healthcare workers has been a long-standing issue that was further emphasized by the Covid-19 pandemic that put a greater toll on the lives of medical professionals. As a result, many physicians have suffered from extreme stress and burnout; resignations of full-time physicians caused some clinics to close down, and some local hospitals put their workers on longer shifts with increased patient counts.

Health departments and hospitals have been looking for solutions to this staffing issue. One solution may be found with locum tenens physicians.

For many years, professionals from the medical field have been used to following the traditional practice where a physician takes a permanent, full-time job in a facility or starts their own clinic. For many this is a great option; however, while there is nothing wrong with that, locum tenens offers many benefits that are often overlooked.

For the physicians who work it, locum tenens provides far more freedom and flexibility than is found in traditional employment in a clinic or hospital. You can work on a schedule that best fits you. With that, you also have time to focus on your passions outside of medicine while still being able to practice your profession. With its flexible patient schedule and the right working hours, you can give more time and energy to your patients. You will be able to educate them and provide more attention to each one. For many physicians, this is a great option to alleviate stress and enjoy medicine more.

For facilities and physicians still working in traditional roles, locum tenens doctors can still provide a great benefit. Locum tenens can be assigned shifts in hospitals to allow the regular physicians to take longer breaks or lesser shifts. They can also work in hospitals or clinics that are short-staffed. The more these facilities value and maximize locum tenens doctors, the better balance they can achieve in their medical workforce.

In addition, with the advent of telemedicine becoming more of the norm and more locum tenens telemedicine jobs on the rise, there are more opportunities to serve our patients even from a distance. According to Doximity, a study was done that found “that that 20% of all medical visits will be conducted via

telemedicine in 2020, which accounts for more than \$29.3 billion of medical services this year alone.”

So, what can we glean from this?

Ease the burden on traditional physicians

Overworked doctors can be relieved by locum physicians who can take their place. Even if it is just a temporary fix, bringing in locum tenens allows facilities to give their existing staff a break and spread the work around.

Better work-life balance for healthcare workers

Since regular physicians can have that much needed break, they are more re-energized and revamped when getting back to work. They will have more time to focus on their own passions and spend time with their families without getting too drained at work. Physician well-being is a vital priority to maintain.

A higher retention rate for regular physicians

Having locum doctors will give regular physicians more time to take breaks and care for themselves. They won't be as overworked as before, resulting in less chances of these doctors resigning, or burning out.

Physicians have been at the forefront in this battle against the Covid-19 pandemic. They have been taking care of a seemingly endless stream of patients. It's about time they're being taken care of. Locum doctors can definitely make an impact on the medical workforce in hospitals and clinics. With proper management, more and more physicians will finally achieve the balance between their profession and passion despite the demands of the pandemic. ■

Colin Zhu, DO, is a traveling physician who is board certified in family practice/OMT and lifestyle medicine. He has practiced as a CompHealth locum tenens physician for the past four years. Zhu is an international speaker and the author of “Thrive Medicine: How To Cultivate Your Desires and Elevate Your Life” and podcast host of Thrive Bites in which he interviews the latest health and wellness experts about incorporating a plant-powered lifestyle, enhancing emotional wellness, and creating a thriving mindset.