

# HOW TO ADD A NUTRITION ANCILLARY

No complaint is more unnerving than the one voiced by the patient who –despite many office visits and diligent compliance with doctor instructions – feels progress toward good health is coming at too slow a pace.

Such a perception can lead to discouragement, from which springs dissatisfaction and eventual departure in the hope of finding real help elsewhere.

Of course, while losing a dissatisfied patient is a blow to your self-confidence, it's more so a slap at the economic soundness of your practice. Because, when the unhappy vanish, they take with them an unknown number of referrals you'll now never receive.

## Food for thought

An essential key, therefore, to keeping patients satisfied is to provide the sure, steady, undeniable improvements in the health status they crave.

One very viable way to do precisely that is with the launch of a nutrition ancillary.

Jennifer Ridley, DC, owner of LiveWell Chiropractic and Wellness in Hurst, Tex., can attest to the virtues of prescribing nutrition products – vitamins and food supplements, chiefly – and of counseling the malnourished about eating right.

She opened her office in 2006 as a general chiropractic practice. Some 18 months later, Ridley, who is trained in chiropractic neurology and functional medicine, introduced nutrition services as a compliment to that practice. Today, her nutrition ancillary represents fully 50% of her total caseload. Moreover, approximately half the referrals Ridley receives are specifically for individuals seeking non-pharmaceutical treatment of acid reflux, blood-sugar imbalances, food allergies and other conditions outside the conventional purview of a chiropractor.

## The secret revealed

Building a successful nutrition ancillary involves four basic steps. They require you to:

- **decide what you really want to accomplish with this ancillary;**
- **acquire knowledge;**
- **establish relationships with testing labs;**
- **choose a nutraceutical dispensing methodology.**

## Decide what you really want to accomplish

Providing a higher level of overall care is perhaps the most foundational aim in offering nutraceuticals.

“I found that treating patients nutritionally in concert with chiropractic methods delivered appreciably better results,” says Ridley. “Since the body is an interactive system, lack of proper nutrition adversely affects the whole. I can work on the spine endlessly and see disappointingly little or no progress if part of the problem is nutrition.”

A nutrition ancillary can also act as a vehicle for effectively countering detrimental or useless misinformation.

“Too many patients today are self-diagnosing on the Internet and trying to treat themselves accordingly,” Ridley says. “Unfortunately, because the information they find is overwhelming and so often erroneous, they're fairly lost. I see it as my mission to point these

patients in the right direction by giving them reliable, accurate information and then helping them make sense of it all.”

A sizable segment of the public distrust chiropractors. A nutrition ancillary can help change those perceptions. According to Ridley, nutrition concerns attract a certain percentage of people who might otherwise be opposed to visiting a chiropractic office.

“This ancillary can be a mechanism for building trust,” she says. “Once trust is gained, people feel confident about asking you to look into their musculoskeletal issues.”

## **Acquire knowledge**

The next major step involves identifying the nutrition-related conditions your office will routinely treat. With such a roster in hand, you’re ready to research each condition and learn as much as possible about signs, symptoms, pathologies and treatment strategies.

“Your research must also include a survey of the nutraceutical products themselves and the companies that make them,” Ridley insists. “When I was working through this process myself, I looked for companies with the most trusted products as suggested by scientific studies. I’m a big believer in evidence-based practice, so it was crucial to locate products with the strongest, most reputable findings in support of them.”

Resources Ridley utilized in this quest for knowledge included the Institute of Functional Medicine ([www.functionalmedicine.org](http://www.functionalmedicine.org)) in Gig Harbor, Wash. She also relied on colleagues for product and vendor recommendations.

After gaining sufficient familiarity with the choices, Ridley then obtained samples of the products to try out on herself, her family and her office staff. “Not until I had seen personally how well a product worked did I make a final decision about including it in my nutrition ancillary,” she says. “When I try the products first, I can better anticipate things my patients might experience with them. If you’re going to be taken seriously when you talk the talk about nutrition’s role in health and wellness, you need to be able to walk the walk.”

## **Establish relationships with testing labs**

To know what nutraceuticals to prescribe, you must correctly diagnose the problem. Therefore, tests are an indispensable tool in this regard.

Ridley works with at least four different labs for various specialized tests. Each is a top-rated facility. “Just as with my nutraceutical vendors, I wanted to align myself with labs that would give me results I could trust,” she explains.

When tests are needed, Ridley draws blood samples in-office and then forwards the specimens. Gaining this capability required but a small investment in clinic tools, plus training in their use.

Sending samples to a lab necessitates use of an overnight delivery service, so you’ll find it advantageous to develop relationships with one or more of them too.

“For the collected specimens to remain viable, you often have to ship them the same day they’re drawn – the next day at the very latest,” says Ridley. “I’ve arranged a daily pickup schedule with one of the overnight delivery companies that serves my community.”

## **Choose a nutraceutical dispensing methodology**

The most common – and profitable – means of putting the vitamins and supplements you prescribe into the hands of patients is to dispense them directly in-office.

A controversial aspect of in-office dispensing revolves around product displaying. Some

chiropractors feel that putting bottles and packages out on the shelves at the reception desk and in other high-visibility locations makes for smart internal marketing. Others, like Ridley, think displays can be problematic.

“It’s akin to what medical doctors face as a result of direct-to-consumer marketing on television – it encourages patients to request products that may not be right for them,” she says. “The way around this dilemma is to focus on building awareness of your nutrition services in a general sense, rather than touting individual products.”

Other good advice:

- **Ask the vendor for a prescription-writing system** to facilitate in-office dispensing. These can save you time and spare you much hassle.

- **Resist the temptation to opportunistically jump** from vendor to vendor in response to special deals and other incentives that crop up.

“Stable partnerships with vendors give you the best shot at making sure the products you need can be obtained when you need them,” says Ridley.

- **Ask questions.** Ridley makes good use of her vendors’ customer support help-lines, especially those that give her access to high-level clinical expertise.

“One of my key vendors,” she says, “is Drucker Labs, which always has at least one physician available to help me promptly resolve concerns about the products. With their assistance, I’m able to make sure my patients proceed along the best possible path for the best possible results.”

- **Give patients educational materials.** Some nutraceuticals manufacturers provide ready-to-use handouts that you can pass along to those under your care. “These materials are usually informative and visually attractive,” says Ridley, adding that she reinforces vendor-supplied patient-education literature with teaching content of her own.

## **Rewards await**

A nutrition ancillary, handled properly, can quickly emerge as a profit center for a chiropractic practice.

But, even if it ends up directly contributing little or nothing to the revenue stream, a nutrition ancillary can be helpful to a practice.

“The overarching reason to dispense vitamins and supplements in-office is to provide another avenue for helping patients get well,” says Ridley. “If they get well, their satisfaction with you will increase and they will be more inclined to refer to you. If they refer, your practice will grow.”

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