Clinical Research in Private Practice: Q&A With Robin T. Zon, MD, FACP

Karen L. Smith, MD

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I'm concerned that if I enter a private practice, I will not have time to engage in some of the clinical research and educational activities which drew me to oncology as a specialty. How do you allocate your time such that you meet your productivity requirements with regard to patient care and have time for research and educational activities?

*Robin T. Zon,
MD, FACP*

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Effective time management in private practice is what will allow you to develop a successful and rewarding career. Essential to accomplishing this is understanding what your specific goals and priorities are relating to your practice. Expect your current goals and priorities to change as you mature professionally and personally. Continual re-evaluation of your goals

is necessary. It is crucial to remain flexible, especially in these times of reimbursement change and the rapid evolution of cancer therapies. These external forces require us to continually re-evaluate the balance of productivity, clinical research and educational activities in order to remain successful in our professional life.

With respect to productivity, the practice situation you work in will have a defined time frame within which you are expected to have direct patient contact. This will include not only your expected hours of office care, but also the number of patients you are expected to see in order to be considered productive. This expectation is likely to differ among practice environments; for example a solo private practice will have a different productivity formula than a staff model HMO. It is essential that you work with your practicing partners and your practice manager to understand the formula and how you can achieve your productivity goal. Initially, your productivity should be evaluated at least quarterly to assure that you are on target with both your personal expectations and the practice's expectations. Additionally, you should inquire as to whether the practice model you are joining has administrative time incorporated into your work schedule.

Allocation of time to engage in clinical research will depend on what you want to achieve. Enrollment of patients in clinical trials is real time and can be integrated into your everyday patient contact. Understanding what support is available to you for patient enrollment will help you facilitate this process most efficiently. Maximally utilize your support staff in this endeavor. If you choose

to assume more of an administrative role in clinical research, such as being a local principal investigator, serving on committees or working with the institutional review board, these activities should be scheduled before or after your office patient contact time. Knowing which of the administrative related tasks can be completed at home or at the office will help you manage your time. Ask questions of your colleagues and the research staff regarding the time commitment required for administrative activities and the exact responsibilities as well as what support you will be provided for these endeavors, including secretarial. Be clear at the start on the expectations regarding attendance at offsite multiday meetings as it relates to the clinical research administrative role. To accommodate the various administrative roles, inquire as to whether your partners will provide coverage support and whether patient contact hours can be adjusted without hindering productivity.

Educational activity time will be based on what is available to you. Usually this includes tumor boards, evening guest speaker presentations, teleconferences, CD-ROMs and weekend educational events sponsored by a variety of organizations. Prioritizing what is best for your patients, your practice and your schedule will determine to how many of these activities you can commit. Typically tumor boards are scheduled around physician schedules to assure attendance. Tumor boards are not only a place to exchange ideas regarding patient management, but also serve as an opportunity to integrate locally available clinical research opportunities into patient care and as a source for continued medical education credit. Teleconferencing as well as CD-ROM activities can be integrated into your free time as you see fit. Weekend meetings are abundantly available and usually require travel and personal assumption of expense, either partially or completely. The meetings need to be scheduled around not only your call schedule but also your personal commitments and budget. Each year pick at least one or two meetings you consider essential for your professional development and commit to those.

Initially when you enter private practice you will experience steep learning curves in patient management skills and in learning the business of oncology. Learning to balance your professional schedule with your personal commitments to your family, community and yourself is a process that requires time and flexibility. If you appreciate that your involvement in these multiple responsibilities will fluctuate over time, and are willing to be creative and diligent, you will achieve overall life reward and success.

Karen L. Smith, MD is a hematology/oncology fellow at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Robin T. Zon, MD, FACP, is currently a partner with Michiana Hematology-Oncology, PC, in South Bend, IN. Dr. Zon also serves as the Cancer Control Principal Investigator for the Northern Indiana Research Consortium CCOP as well as co-chair for the ASCO sponsored Clinical Trials Workshop for Community Oncologists being held in October, 2005.