

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Keeping Pace

I enjoy going for a long run along the Potomac River every morning. At the beginning of each year, I set a lofty goal for the total number of miles that I want to run by Dec. 31—this year's goal is 2,500. Regardless of the season or my lecture schedule, I try to keep my monthly mileage about the same in order to achieve my annual goal. I apply this same mindset to achieve my financial goals for my practice. I find that consistency is the key to remaining on track both personally and professionally.

Maintaining consistency in my monthly collections requires me to prepare every year for four months: February, May, September, and December. Each of these months, which conveniently fall into separate fiscal quarters, is challenging for a different reason: fewer days in February, the AAO annual meeting (although next year's is in April) and standardized testing in May, the start of school in September, and the winter holidays in December. Your schedule may differ from mine, depending on your community and travel commitments.

My strategy is to fill these months with *recall consultations* who are ready to begin treatment. These patients are usually children who have already visited the office; I have taken their records and tentatively planned their treatment. Essentially, I am stacking my schedule with expected "same-day starts" to ensure that each clinical day will be successful financially. The key is to schedule the appointment for the specific month you want to target. To do this, you need to walk the parent out when the initial consultation is over and speak directly with the receptionist. For example, if a consultation patient is not ready to begin at an October visit, I take the family to the front desk and tell the receptionist, "I want to see them again for another consultation *in May.*" If

you allow the parents to set their own schedule, they will make the appointment during summer break when it is more convenient for them. I like to close the deal by saying to the family, "Be ready for the braces to go on at the next visit!"

I apply a similar strategy for initial consultations who are ready to begin treatment in a month when I am ahead of pace. This typically occurs in January, which is historically a high-collection month because new flexible-spending account funds are available. If I am ahead of my collection goals near the end of January, I might schedule the patient's first appointment (or payment) for February. In running terms, this would be the equivalent of taking a "rest day" to be fresh for tomorrow.

Above all, consistent monthly collections ensure that I can provide conservative and ethical treatment. I don't want to feel pressure to have a good collection month because I just had a bad one. I also don't want to walk into a consultation feeling like I need to start a patient's treatment. Today, if I look ahead at my schedule for September, December, February, and May, the consult column is already starting to fill with recall consultations for braces-ready children.

Surpassing 2,500 miles sometime this December will be a special moment for me, but I know it will happen only because of my discipline and consistency every month. Consistency outruns excuses. I hope you consider this practice-management tip to keep your consult column full and collections up during your most challenging months. Every summer, when my office is humming, a parent asks if I am especially busy this time of year. My response is always the same: "Sure I am, but my cadence never really changes."

NDK