The physician assistant will see you now

It can take a logistical wizard to plan the surgery schedule for a practice with multiple locations. Yet a single patient who hasn’t been able to get in to see their primary care doctor for a preop physical can upend it.

It happened enough times at Minnesota Eye Consultants that the Bloomington-based practice decided it needed to do something about it. The solution: hire a physician assistant (PA) who could do preop physicals in-house. Not only would having a PA be more convenient for patients, it also would prevent scheduling hiccups for the practice. And a specially trained PA might help identify issues needing further evaluation by a physician.

Candace Simerson, president and chief operating officer, got the idea while attending a conference in 2009. It took about a year for her to develop a business plan, prepare space and acquire equipment, educate payers about the service and hire the right person.

In January 2010, the practice put its first PA to work. Having the new position helped so much that Minnesota Eye Consultants hired a second PA in 2013. Together, the two PAs rotate through the practice’s five Twin Cities locations.

With PAs on staff, the scheduler can properly time physicals for patients, many of whom need two cataract surgeries about a month apart. The PAs line up the physical—which insurers require within 30 days of surgery—so that it covers both procedures. If the timing doesn’t work, they might schedule a second physical when the patient is at the clinic for follow-up after the first surgery. About 40 percent of patients take advantage of the in-house physical option, Simerson says. However, some need to see their own physicians because of complicated health histories.

Jill Melicher, MD, a partner and surgeon at Minnesota Eye Consultants, says she and her colleagues are definitely pro-PA. “The biggest benefit is that we can offer a service to our patients with noncomplicated health histories in a short period of time under our roof,” she says.

In addition to making surgical scheduling easier, the PAs also assist the ophthalmologists by screening patients for allergies, Sjogren’s syndrome and other conditions that can affect the eyes. And they contribute in another way: They provide urgent care for the 250 staff members at the self-insured practice, treating such problems as strep throat and ear infections. “It helps us contain our costs, and employees like not having to leave work to go to urgent care,” Simerson says. “It’s a real benefit because it helps us manage our productivity and costs.”

Minnesota Eye Consultants was on the cusp of a trend when it started having PAs offer preop physicals. Since then, more than a dozen ophthalmology practices in Minnesota and across the country have contacted Simerson to learn more.—SUZY FRISCH