

Eli's Rehab Report

Trends: Hammer Down These Details Before Offer Fitness Services

Asking key questions will help you avoid getting nailed for noncompliance -- or worse.

Your highly trained staff and well-equipped facility may make you a prime candidate for offering post-rehab fitness services, but you can't construct a solid program without doing some serious prep-work.

Why: The population is aging, leading people to look for new and innovative ways to stay fit -- especially after they suffer an injury, says **Paul Martin, MPT**, president of **Martin Healthcare Advisors** in Mount Laurel, N.J.

But just because you could offer post-rehab fitness services doesn't mean you should -- without careful consideration, Martin warns. (See "Don't Blur The Line Between Fitness and Therapy" in Rehab Report Vol. 18 No. 5.)

Examine each of these crucial areas before you decide to offer the program:

Think About The Program Clinically

Your post-rehab program may seem simple from a fitness standpoint, but you can't ignore the clinical side of things, Martin says.

Important: You don't want clients to be confused about whether they're seeing a therapist or a fitness trainer, notes **Lyndean Brick**, principal with **Murer Consultants** in Joliet, Ill. You must make sure your therapists act as medical professionals who are performing a clinical service, she says.

Answering following questions should help you get a grasp on the starter components of the clinical portion of your post-rehab program:

- Who will provide the post-rehab services?
- Which types of therapy interventions will we offer?
- Will we perform fitness assessments?
- Will services be part of a larger clinical program?
- Should patients get a doctor's referral or prescription?

Remember: Part of your job will be to manage patient expectations. You must regularly educate your clients about your program and what results they should expect, Brick recommends. "Every person in your facility must be clear about what services they're getting, and each employee needs to be clear about what services they're offering," she says.

Break It Down Operationally

No amount of clinical strategy will help your practice if you haven't considered the operational impact of offering post-rehab services.

For instance, you may decide to restrict your post-rehab offering to physical therapy only and require that patients have a doctor's referral. However, you then realize that your PTs are swamped with work during normal operating hours and you'll need to keep your facility open longer each day. Concessions like these can hugely affect your bottom line.

Ask yourself these questions to start planning out the best way to offer a post-rehab service:

Will all clients be eligible for the program?

- If yes, when/how will you schedule their appointments?
- If no, what will be the eligibility criteria?

Is your facility prepared for a higher level of current patients (since many won't move on)?

- Do you need a larger space?
- Do you need extra equipment?
- Do you need more frequent water and laundry services?

Who will be in charge of the program?

- How will the person track activity?
- What measurement will you use for quality and progress?
- Who will manage staffing and scheduling?
- Will the program be this person's only role in the practice?

Important: The very first question to ask yourself is "Are patients interested in this type of program?" Conduct exit interviews or add questions to patient surveys to find out whether they'd take advantage of a post-rehab service if one became available, Martin suggests.

"Don't forget about past clients," Martin stresses. "This is a great way to get them re-invested in your practice, which will increase word-of-mouth advertising about all your services."

Protect Your Bottom Line

You already struggle to get paid for valuable medical services -- adding a post-rehab program could mean even greater reimbursement headaches, Brick cautions. As with any new program, you have to decide whether you'll risk investing in a post-rehab program on the chance that it doesn't become profitable after the first few months -- or ever.

Reality: Your post-rehab program's focus should be on better managing existing patients and strengthening their bond with your practice, Martin says. Outcomes will improve, patients will recommend you to their friends and family, and you'll find increased revenues naturally follow.

When it comes to dollars and cents, these questions should help you uncover the cost of a new post-rehab program:

- How much will it cost to hire more staff or pay for current staff to work longer hours?
- Will you need to rent or build more space?
- Will you need to rent or buy more equipment?
- Should you account for rehab and post-rehab programs separately?
- How much of your budget will go toward marketing the new program?

Tip: Decrease the upfront costs of spreading the word about your service by asking current and former clients to be your first "customers," Martin advises. Let your referral partners know about the program. Consider free community educational opportunities like health fairs or seminars at local retirement communities.