

Pain Management Coding Alert

Reader Question: Keep These Tips in Mind for Locum Tenens Selection

Question: One of our physicians will be taking a six-month sabbatical, so we need to hire a locum tenens to substitute for her. Could you share some tips on how to find a good substitute physician?

Michigan Subscriber

Answer: When one of your physicians takes extended leave, you can hire a locum tenens physician to take the absent physician's place. You might also hire a locum to fill in for physician assistants (PAs), nurse practitioners (NPs), or certain other providers (although remember that Medicare will not allow a PA or NP to function as locum tenens providers or pay for a locum tenens replacement for those non-physician practitioners).

There are a number of companies that can help you connect to a locum provider in your area. A simple website search will turn up several links that can take you to staffing specialists who could give you leads on local locum physicians. The challenge, however, is finding a provider that matches your practice's needs.

When you are searching for a locum provider, you typically won't have much direct contact with the person you actually end up hiring; you'll deal mostly with the staffing agency that handles the locum's assignments, so choose the staffing agency carefully.

When you contact the staffing agency, be sure you have some basic information ready, such as:

- What type of provider you need;
- Which specialty you need a locum for;
- The exact time frame you'll employ the locum; and
- The compensation you'll offer for the locum (this doesn't have to be an exact amount; a pay range is acceptable).

You'll also want to be sure to lay out expectations for the locum provider when you deal with the staffing agency, so there aren't any surprises when the locum reports for work.

Example: Check out this partial job description from an online ad for a locum physician:

"The physician is expected to:

- practice in accordance within accepted professional standards, organizational values, and with a commitment to excellent customer service;
- demonstrate respect for patients and family while administering care;
- maintain confidentiality of patient information; and
- meet or exceed all current applicable standards of the Joint Commission Accreditation of Health Care Organization."

Once the locum arrives, be sure to include modifier Q6 (Service furnished by a locum tenens physician) on his or her claims. Remember that Medicare guidelines only allow a locum tenens physician to fill in for up to 60 consecutive calendar days. After that point you need to have another locum tenens take over.