Every morning, when I walk into my office, the first thing I do is open up my electronic health records, review patient notes, return patient phone calls and email patient resources as needed.

I decided a long time ago that quality of care needed to be the most important aspect of my business. In order to maintain that practice, I must value and nurture quality of care above all other aspects of my business, including the financial management, marketing, networking, speaking engagements, publications, business growth, etc.

At the time I made that decision, it required a conscious effort to make patient needs a priority even when many other tasks were demanding my urgent attention. Now, I don’t think about it. It’s a habit.

That habit has had a “butterfly effect,” causing a ripple of larger and larger changes. By creating what appears to be a simple habit, my patients have a positive therapeutic experience with improved
outcomes. This leads patients to be more likely to recommend my services to others (which as we know is the most effective form of marketing), creates business growth, increases demands for speaking and publication opportunities, and ultimately improves the profit of the business. All a result of a habit.

By gaining a better understanding of your bad habits, it can make it easier to implement a healthier, more productive alternative. In my example, the old habit was to handle pressing business tasks, which ultimately limited my time to handle patient needs. The trigger was walking into work facing emails, voice mails and a never-ending “to do” list that did not necessarily have to do with direct patient treatment. By putting out all of the little fires going on around me, it gave me short-term relief to know I was addressing tasks that required my attention. However, the long-term consequence was patient treatment was not meeting my expectations of quality of care. When I choose to replace my old habit with a new more productive habit, my business tasks presented each morning are now my cue to stop and address patient needs first. Upon completion of the priority task, I then allow myself the mental space to handle the remaining demands rather than juggling it all at once and finding myself off course. The reward is short-term and long-term sense of accomplishment and productivity.

So does it really take 21 days to create a new habit? Research is conflicted on this magic number with Phillippa Lally and colleagues from University College London finding the reality to be closer to 66 days. At some point behavior can become automatic, but I suggest focusing less on the magic number and focusing more on gaining insight into your patterns of behavior, establishing a goal, and practice, practice, practice.

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