

MMP Interviews Denise Price Thomas – Medical Practice Manager, Medical Consultant and Comedienne



MMP: Welcome to Manage My Practice, Denise! What is your background in medical practice management?

DPT: My first job in healthcare was in 1975 (I was 5 years old). I was hired to work in radiology having high hopes of developing...but that never happened. I memorized the color coded X-ray jackets and turned locating them for physicians into a challenging game. Because of my consistently positive attitude, I was promoted to receptionist. Later I was recruited to work for a general surgery practice in town where I was employed for the next 32 years. During that time, I was promoted to Administrator and became Certified in Healthcare Management through Pfeiffer College.

MMP: Tell me about the process of becoming a healthcare comedienne.

DPT: Humor has escorted me through many difficult times in my life. By finding the “funny side up” in a situation, I am able

to keep an open mind, learn from it and share with others in training programs. A good example ~ when I introduce my contagious characters, i.e. “Ima Gossip” as the person that will keep the bad news stirring and “Shirley Knott” who will surely not schedule another patient for that doctor, I am able to introduce some uncomfortable issues in a way that everyone can appreciate....”Justin Case” they work around them.

MMP: Things are very gloom and doom in healthcare today – how do you take such a tough subject and inject humor into it?

DPT: I remember thinking some days “this is the worst day EVER!” only to find out that I was wrong – another one was just around the corner. We are hardest on ourselves. We have to keep an open mind, find the best in things. For instance, being part of advisory committees for years, I remember discussing (and doubting) reasons we would ever use the internet in our practices. Now I’d hate to see us doing without it, wouldn’t you? I have always enjoyed making changes in our practice...for the better that is. When introducing something new, I would always say, “we know how it is now, we can change it right back if the new way doesn’t work” and sometimes we did...but we wouldn’t know unless we tried.



MMP: Who is Gladys Friday?

DPT: She awakened me in the middle of the night. I keep a pen and paper on my nightstand because thoughts, names and programs come to me in the middle of the night and if I do not write them down right then, I will go back to sleep and forget them. I saw her as this healthy old school nurse (just like my nurse when I delivered my first daughter in 1971). Everyone is always “glad it’s Friday” so that is her name...”Gladys Friday”. Once you get it, you don’t forget it. Of course,

Gladys loves of all her “Friday Fans” that follow her on her blog and her Youtube Channel! She is able to address many difficult situations regarding health, bosses, aging, marriage, families and life itself. Since she is well seasoned, she has lots to share, i.e. colonoscopy experience, mammograms, suppository stories and more.

MMP: You speak to so many groups around the nation – what do you hear from your audiences that they are struggling with in healthcare?

DPT: People share with me just how difficult it is to know what their employees are doing and how they are representing their facility. They are challenged to find employees with a positive attitude that truly want to make a difference. Sometimes attention is focused on “fixing” substandard employees and the employees that raise the bar seem to go unnoticed. I have had the opportunity to hire employees with a positive attitude that quickly learn the necessary skills. I have found it difficult, if not impossible to train someone who insists on having a bad attitude. No matter where we are and what we’ve been through, attitude is a choice.

MMP: I know you are often called upon to be a Mystery Shopper or Mystery Patient. How does that work and what kinds of problems do you see in the offices you visit?

DPT: I LOVE being an “Undercover Patient” (Mystery Patient). It is my way of addressing the positive experiences throughout the facility and sharing information on which areas may need a little (or a lot) more polish. I enjoy pointing out the good things. The follow up is so important once we know how our patients are treated. When my Daddy was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma, we found ourselves on the other side of healthcare, the side that was unfamiliar to me. The manner in which my Daddy was treated (the good, the bad and the unreal), taught me that every healthcare professional does not treat patients with compassion. We were unable to measure the

clinical expertise of the many physicians and healthcare professionals surrounding him but we were able to measure how we felt when we were around them. Thus, my mission. It is my desire to make a positive difference in continuing compassion in healthcare. That should always be the #1 method of treatment, regardless. I want everyone to know just how important compassion is on the other side of healthcare.

MMP: Front desk staff are now called upon to do so many more things than in the past. They often are squeezed by the patients on one side and the clinical staff on the other. What can managers do to help these staff perform better under these circumstances?

DPT: You are so right! The front desk staff has a tremendous responsibility and must juggle many tasks with a smile! Many times the patients fuss at them for the physician running behind schedule but once in the exam room, the physician says, "I'm sorry you've had to wait" and the patient smiles and says, "that's alright Doctor, I know you are busy" **WHAT!?!** It happens all the time. I think the best way to approach this is by team building exercises with the staff, role playing & cross training. Many times the front desk has no idea of the clinical needs. Also, the clinical staff will sometimes stand back and wait on a chart rather than assisting the front desk in the preparation. Everyone wins with a team approach. I recently customized a team building program, sharing it with urgent care facilities and physician practices where this team approach continues to be carried out.



MMP: You parody an "older" nurse (if I may be so bold) and some problems she creates in the practice. Older employees can be difficult to coach through the many changes practices are experiencing. Do you have any recommendations for making this situation better?

DPT: Yes ma'am. I am best able to laugh at myself...I've had a lot of experience with that one. I share those "happy-nings" with others. LIFE is all about change. Don't you just love it when people say, "we've never done it like that!" or "that will NOT work here, I can tell you that right now!" If we did not accept change, where would we be...still in the DARK for one! Communication is a huge player. Everyone wants to feel a part of something good. When your staff hears about internal changes from someone on the outside, that never works. I remember one particular time in our practice when we were facing many changes. During our staff meeting, I made the statement that I felt that it was very important for people to be happy in their job and their happiness, or lack thereof, was written all over their faces. We normally spend more waking hours at work than with our families. We have the opportunity to create a positive working environment so that everyone can be happy while at work. I wanted everyone to understand they had a choice to be happy but if they were not happy, I wanted them to find happiness elsewhere. I still believe that today. We all have choices. No one can take away my happiness unless I give them permission to do so. It is my choice.

MMP: What's the funniest thing you've ever seen or heard about happening in a practice

DPT: Oh my, how long do we have? Well, I remember the man who walked into our office and told the receptionist he was there to pick up his autopsy report. She told him that he would have to wait a while and asked him to come around to the other hallway. Over a cup of coffee, she learned he was there for his biopsy report, WHEW! I also remember the time that our clinical staff unknowingly placed two patients in the same exam room. One was behind the door, the second one was brought in and was seated on the exam table. Fortunately, they were both males! One was there for a mole check, the other for a hernia. When the physician shook the hand of the patient on

the table he asked, "is this your brother?" Patient #1 said, "we just met 5 minutes ago!" The fun part was that they shared their telephone numbers and the one with the mole actually called to check on the one who had hernia surgery. This was PRE-HIPAA, thank goodness!

MMP: What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given that you would like to pass along to MMP readers?

DPT: My Daddy always gave me such great advice about many things in life, all continue to help me today. One is "you can do anything anyone else can do, some things even better...but you are no better than anyone else." I am so fortunate that my passion is also my profession as it is my desire to make a positive difference along the way, leaving things better in my rear view mirror.

Denise Price Thomas
Motivational & Inspirational

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