



NEWS CAPSULE

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HAVE YOU HIRED A THIEF?

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It sounds so cliché, however, I was recently getting my haircut and was admiring the hairstyle of the woman sitting in the next chair. For the sake of this story, let's call her Joan. Joan seemed pleasant enough. After Joan left, the stylist cutting my hair said, "you'd never know Joan was caught embezzling a quarter of a million dollars from her previous employer." My jaw dropped. My stylist continued, "at least she's paying it back."

I was curious. So, I firmly asked, "How could she possibly pay it back, who would hire her?" Without hesitation my stylist resumed the story. "Well, Joan's friend Flo (a fictitious name for the purposes of this story), was really itching to leave her job at a doctor's office for a higher paying job at a physician's office up the road. Since Flo didn't want to leave her employer in a bind by quitting, she referred Joan to the doctor to replace her. The doctor met her and liked her. It was easy enough to simply hire her for the front desk position, and be done with it. When I asked how the doctor could have agreed to hire this lady, my stylist simply replied Flo never told him about Joan's checkered past. Obviously, Joan never said anything either... about her criminal past.

The irony here is who's more at fault? Is it Joan the thief, Flo the trusted employee who deceived the doctor with regard to her friend's criminal past, or the doctor who although well intentioned, was too trusting? The answer to the question of who is more at fault raises moral, ethical and legal issues, but the bottom line is that a dishonest person is now sitting at the front desk with co-pays at her fingertips, and who knows what else.

As a partner in a healthcare staffing firm, I am acutely aware of the necessity to screen out candidates that lie to us, and/or have a criminal history that would be relevant to working in a medical office. Without proper screening procedures in place, the medical

practices, as well as the patients are at risk. In this case, the doctor chose to rely upon the referral of an employee he trusted, and in a perfect world he could do just that. Unfortunately, this particular physician either didn't have screening procedures in place, or chose not to utilize them. This made him the victim of deception. Not only did his former employee take advantage of him, but the replacement employee with a criminal background took advantage of him too. If Joan decided to commit embezzlement again, she could potentially destroy this doctor's practice. It should be noted that Joan and Flo are still employed at medical practices.

A modern physician's office is extremely vulnerable on multiple levels. Let's examine some of the dangers that might exist. The obvious reason is there's cash present in the office as a result of co-pays. But there are also a lot of Social Security numbers lying around, of patients and staff that are often easily accessible. And don't forget insurance information, which is also a target. Not only are patients' identities at risk, so is the identity of the physician and his or her staff. Factor in the fact that many criminals are repeat offenders, and all the elements for a catastrophic outcome are present. I frequently speak of offering a higher level of patient service - suffice it to say, if your practice is employing financially dishonest individuals, you've probably got a bigger problem than ramping up customer service.

I believe the proper screening of a potential new hire through a well-trained unbiased third party is the best way to be protected. You can certainly accept employee referrals, which is an excellent way of hiring new people. BUT, any candidates that are referred to you must go through the same stringent screening process as strangers. Remember, there are no shortcuts in life. None that are safe anyway. The reason you need an unbiased third party to verify a potential employee's background is that references tend to be fudged, or important information such as whether or not a candidate has a conviction might be withheld. It's also possible that well-intentioned employees simply refer poor candidates for potential employment.

In business, there is an old maxim, "it's better to know, then not to know." I would strongly submit you have to know "who" is working in your office, or the consequences might prove devastating.