

Use it as a marketing tool

Accreditation status can set you apart from others

You've worked hard to get your surgery center accredited, and you know that means your patients can be assured of a high level of safety and quality -- unlike the cosmetic surgery practice down the street. But do your patients and potential patients know about your accreditation and what it means to them?

Probably not, unless you have made a point of explaining it to them. An accredited practice that doesn't actively inform patients about the accreditation and what it means is missing a real opportunity, says **George J. Beraka, MD, FACS**, an attending plastic surgeon at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York. Until you tell them, most patients don't even know to ask about accreditation, Beraka says. And they certainly don't know the differences among accreditation from the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities (AAAASF) in Gurnee, IL, the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care (AAAHC) in Wilmette, IL, or the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) in Oakbrook Terrace, IL.

It is easy for plastic surgeons to assume that everyone knows what accreditation means and that it is required by the American Society for Plastic Surgery and some states, Beraka says. But in fact, people outside the profession know little about surgery center accreditation. Educating them about accreditation can have a major effect on how comfortable they feel with your practice, he says. (See next page for an example of how Beraka educates patients.)

In particular, the accreditation can be a way to set yourself apart from other plastic surgery providers who don't meet the same standards.

"In New York, as long as you have a license to practice medicine, you can do office surgery," he says. "You also have physicians doing procedures they don't have privileges to do at any hospital, like the dermatologist who does liposuction in his office. Our accreditation is a way to set us apart from physicians like that, to say that we are on a different level and you can trust that you are in good hands. From a marketing standpoint, this is a huge selling point."

Educate patients about safety

Beraka says most of his patients have heard horror stories about botched procedures and patients who died during plastic surgery, but 99% of his patients are unaware of how accreditation addresses some of the problems that can lead to tragedy. Surgeons should seize the opportunity to educate patients whenever they express any concerns about safety, especially the risk of operating outside a hospital.

"Don't wait for them to ask about accreditation because they're not going to," he says. "Listen for the times when they are concerned about what would happen if something went wrong and they're outside of a hospital. That's where you explain that you are accredited and what that means for their safety."

The amount of detail you go into will depend on the patient's level of concern, Beraka says. For the patient who is merely curious, a simple explanation about the accreditation might suffice. But for the patient who is concerned that your facility is not as safe as a hospital, it might be appropriate to go into more detail about the accreditation requirements, everything from the physical requirements of the operating room to the way all staff are credentialed in advanced cardiac life support.

Blow your own horn

Beraka sometimes takes patients on a tour of the surgery center to show them the facilities and the equipment available for emergencies.

"Patients are so confused about this. If I sense that they need to be sold on me or don't know where to have surgery, then I go in to a great deal of detail," he says. "It's not enough to tell them you're accredited and expect them to be impressed."

Also, Beraka's patient handouts for each procedure include a paragraph that explains the patient has the option of undergoing surgery at the hospital or in the surgery center, and it explains what the center's accreditation means. The practice intake coordinator also explains the accreditation to patients.

Any advertising materials also should emphasize the surgery center accreditation -- whether it is AAAASF, AAAHC, JCAHO or any combination, Beraka says, to show that "I'm the safer surgeon to go to."

A selling point

Accreditation can be a selling point if potential patients are focused on price, suggests **William B. Rosenblatt**, MD, a plastic surgeon in New York. But at the same time, patients may not know how to put a value on accreditation. If someone is trying to choose between plastic surgery at a non-accredited facility and an accredited surgery center, it may be difficult for the patient to decide if the price difference is justified.

That's when the doctor must make every effort to explain the value of accreditation, he says. In his own practice, that effort starts when the patient first walks up to the reception desk in Rosenblatt's office. There, right behind the receptionist's head where you can't miss it, is the plaque signifying that the surgery center is accredited by AAAASF. She makes a point of mentioning to the patient when booking the surgery that the facility is accredited.

"We also go over it during the consult, and if they ask what that means, I'm glad to go into as much detail they want," he says. "Even if they don't ask, I'll bring it up."

Rosenblatt's letterhead also includes the symbol of the American Society of Plastic Surgery. He says he doesn't know how much patients actually notice such things, but he does think it is worthwhile to include such notations at every possibility.

"We want the message to always be that I'm a real plastic surgeon, that I'm not one of those fly-by-night guys who took a correspondence course," he says. "Our accreditation ought to be promoted as a strong point, something that sets us apart from other practices, just as much as our skills in a particular pro-

cedure, or our experience, or our board certification."

Savvy patients ask about accreditation

Ronald Iverson, MD, a plastic surgeon in Pleasanton, CA, chair of the ASPS Patient Safety Committee, notes all the accrediting organizations provide patient education materials to help explain what accreditation means.

"The data are starting to show that people do better in accredited facilities, so there is a good opportunity here to show patients why it is to their benefit to seek out an accredited facility," he says.

Iverson says that, at least in northern California, there is a growing awareness of what accreditation means. As people hear about the potential dangers of plastic surgery, the more savvy patients will start asking about things like board certification and accreditation, he says.

"They may not know exactly what to ask, but they ask why they should feel safe in your surgery center, and that's a fair question," he says. "The difference between the accredited facility and the non-accredited facility is that when you're accredited, they don't have to take your word for it that you're meeting some rigorous safety standards. They can see that someone else has inspected your facility and deemed it a safe place to operate."

Iverson always brings up the accreditation and his patient care coordinator reinforces it as well.

"We talk to our patients about appropriate credentials for the physician and appropriate credentials for the facility," Iverson says. "As surgeons, we don't seem too shy about telling people about our credentials but we need to make sure the patient knows the actual place they're having surgery is as good as the surgeon."

Editor's Note: Contact George J. Beraka at (212) 288-1122, William B. Rosenblatt at (212) 570-6100, and Ronald Iverson at (925) 462-3700. ●

Website showcases surgery center accreditation, explains benefits

George J. Beraka, MD, FACS, an attending plastic surgeon at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, makes a point explaining to all his private practice patients that he operates in an accredited surgery center. On his practice website, he includes a page that offers this information:

Our Accredited Surgical Suite

We are about to complete upgrading the state-of-the-art surgical suite in our office. Our surgical suite is accredited and certified at the highest level by The American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgical Facilities. This means that we meet and exceed stringent national standards for equipment, operating safety, personnel and surgeon credentials. We are certified to use any type of anesthesia for your operation in a totally safe environment. We work only with top board certified anesthesiologists.

Everyone who works in our operating room is licensed and certified. We have every piece of equipment necessary for various surgical procedures, for patient monitoring and safety; and all our equipment is regularly inspected.

Our surgical suite was built to meet operating room construction codes about dimensions, materials, layout and ventilation. We adhere to the highest sterility and infection control standards. The surgical suite includes a fully equipped recovery room.

Our surgical suite is inspected regularly and we perform regular peer reviews.

All these facts are very important because New York State has no laws or regulations that control office surgery. In New York, any licensed doctor can perform office surgery in any space legally.

Some doctors perform office surgery even though they do not have hospital privileges to perform surgery in any hospital. Because there is no mandatory supervision, some office surgery is performed in unsafe environments.

In other states such as California and Florida, it is illegal to do office surgery in a facility that is not accredited but in New York, you have to be very careful where you have surgery. Make sure that the place is accredited. New York State has voluntary guidelines for office operating rooms but many offices do not meet these guidelines.