

What Every Physician Should Know about Locum Tenens

Though locum tenens is a fancy term, it's a simple concept. It means "to take the place of someone temporarily." In healthcare, it refers to physicians who fill in when a hospital or facility needs help.

In the United States, the idea of locum tenens dates back to 1970, when two physicians from the University of Utah received funding for a project aimed at providing care to rural areas of the country. The first locum tenens staffing company was formed in 1979.

An estimated 40,000 physicians now work locum tenens assignments each year, and more than 90 percent of hospitals and other facilities use locum tenens physicians to fill positions.

Why physicians work locum tenens assignments

Locum tenens assignments are available in more than 100 medical specialties at facilities throughout the country. Assignments vary in length from an evening shift to several months at a time. Physicians have the freedom to choose which assignments they take.

Though some doctors work locum tenens in place of a full-time position, the majority work locum tenens in addition to a full-time job, as a stopgap between permanent jobs, or as a way to transition from practice into retirement.

Here are just a few of the many reasons why doctors choose to work locum tenens:

- The chance to test-drive a job before signing a long-term contract
- The opportunity to give back by serving in rural or underserved areas
- Scheduling flexibility and better work/life balance
- Less time spent on administrative work and more time with patients
- Earning a competitive salary without overhead costs

Why hospitals use locum tenens

Facilities often use locum tenens to cover a permanent physician's leave (e.g., vacation, maternity, CME training), to deal with increase patient load, or to fill the gap while hiring a new doctor.

Locum tenens physicians work in all types of settings, including hospitals, surgery centers, private practice, specialty groups, urgent care centers, home health, and telemedicine. Though jobs are available in every size of city, there is a pressing need in rural locations and underserved urban areas.

How locum tenens assignments work

More than 80 percent of locum tenens physicians find their assignments through a staffing agency. Here's a quick overview of the process:

1. The physician contacts a staffing company (a directory of agencies is available through the National Association of Locum Tenens Organizations)
2. The physician is assigned a recruiter from the agency
3. The physician lets the recruiter know what he or she is looking for in a job, e.g., care setting, geographic location, assignment length
4. The recruiter presents the doctor's information (name, CV, certifications) to facilities that match what the physician is looking for
5. Once the physician is selected by a facility, the staffing company handles the credentialing and hospital privileging
6. If the physician is working in a new state, the staffing company helps obtain the license
7. The staffing agency takes care of the housing and accommodations, including flights, car rentals, and housing
8. The staffing agency pays the locum tenens physician and covers malpractice insurance

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What to look for in a locum tenens staffing agency

There are now dozens, if not hundreds, of locum tenens staffing agencies in the United States, ranging from small mom-and-pop shops to full-service companies.

Here are a few questions physicians should ask before working with an agency:

- How many jobs and locations are available?
- Do you understand my specialty?
- Do you handle my licensing and credentialing?
- Do you offer malpractice coverage?
- Can you ensure I will work in a good environment?
- How do you handle travel?
- How will I get paid?

What makes a good locum tenens physician?

Depending on the location and specialty, locum tenens assignments can be very competitive. Facilities are not only looking for physicians with solid training and work history but those who communicate effectively with staff and patients. Locum tenens physicians must be able to quickly acclimatize to new people, policies, and technologies. More than anything, employers are looking for a physician who is flexible and can handle the changes inherent in working in a temporary setting.

Where to learn more

For more information about the locum tenens, including its history, its current impact on patients, and real stories from real locum tenens, visit www.locumstory.com.

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