



## ION: A Physician-Driven Provider Network

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# ION: A Physician-Driven Provider Network

by Jeffrey A. Scott, M.D.

**T**he International Oncology Network (ION), formed just two years ago, has grown to represent about 25 percent of private practicing medical oncologists in the U.S. and continues to expand. Currently, ION has more than 2,000 oncologists, representing 650 practices in 48 states.

As a physician-driven provider network specializing in oncology, ION's growing membership has allowed the company to leverage its considerable buying mass to achieve two main goals for its physicians: 1) substantive cost savings through chemotherapy drug discounting and 2) significant revenue enhancement opportunities through a host of value-added programs. Even more important, each member practice retains 100 percent of its current ownership, control, and autonomy.

Physician practices that join ION are offered *the option* of participating in any of its initiatives. These include group purchasing of pharmaceuticals, education programs, formulary management, managed care contracts, national clinical trials, reimbursement assistance, an electronic medical record (a national database of oncology care), and more.

## DRUG DISPENSING SYSTEMS

Through an affiliated agreement with Omnicell.com, ION can offer its members an automated medical dispensing system for chemotherapy drug usage in their practice. This

system is provided to ION physicians at a substantial discount. In fact, depending on the physicians' utilization, there may be minimal or no charges to the practice.

In a typical oncologist's office, up to 60 percent of the practice's revenues and profits are derived from the administration of chemotherapy. Coupled with decreasing reimbursement pressures, oncologists are searching for ways to either stabilize or improve their office-based infusion program. The Omnicell.com drug dispensing system, already in thousands of hospitals nationwide, provides the community-based oncologist with a wide array of benefits that are targeted at improving fiscal balance, patient safety, and office efficiency.

Although the discount varies by drug class, ION attempts to guarantee its members the best price available from the major drug wholesalers. In addition, ION may be able to improve upon these discounts by entering into direct market share contracts with drug manufacturers. As a group purchasing organization, ION has open member privileges, does not set pricing for physicians, and receives the same treatment from manufacturers as other group purchasing organizations. Thus, no antitrust issues arise.

## PROTOCOL AND ONLINE SERVICES

ION provides access to Phase II, III, and IV clinical trials that many practices otherwise may not obtain. Physician practices are offered clinical trial management based on need. Practices with existing clinical trial infrastructure have opportunities to participate in numerous studies; those without such infrastructures have the chance to devel-

op clinical trial programs using contracted site management.

Clinical trials in oncology are a "win-win opportunity," for both patients, who can try new therapies, and physician practices, which can access new drugs. In addition, participation in trials can enhance patient referral as well as practice revenue.

For interested practices, ION conducts a two-to-three-day protocol development retreat for all physicians of the practice. The objective of the workshop, facilitated by ION's medical director and his clinical staff, is to develop a set of written, protocol guidelines that can be customized to each practice, and then consistently applied by its physicians. ION believes that by applying consistent clinical pathways within the physician practice, several benefits are typically achieved. In addition, there is no charge to the practice for this service.

ION member practices receive educational opportunities through numerous conferences, seminars, and advisory groups. These opportunities are offered throughout the year for physicians, administrators, nursing staff, and pharmacists.

If a practice so chooses, ION can provide radiation therapy services, including initial feasibility studies, design and build capabilities, financing, sales of all necessary equipment, and certificate-of-need assistance.

Finally, ION can help its member practices to develop a turnkey, behavioral medicine program to assess and treat the psychosocial needs of the practice's patients and families. This service houses a full-time licensed, clinical psychologist at the practice, and represents a revenue and profit-generating opportunity for the practice. ■

*Jeffrey A. Scott, M.D., is president and national medical director of ION in Decatur, Ga.*