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Don't forget to prepare your "snowbird" and "sunbird" patients

The number of people age 65 or older will grow to 70 million by 2030 according to the Gerontological Society of America, and more and more physicians will be involved with treating seasonal patients. Today's seniors are more mobile and generally speaking begin to migrate south starting in early November or after the holidays, returning in late April or May for the reverse migration back to the north. This cycle is repeated every year in increasing numbers as baby boomers are able to manage two households and live with increasing mobility.

Typically, most "snowbirds" and "sunbirds" are senior citizens on Medicare. They have lived in the northern part of the country like New Jersey, New York, and the New England states and still maintain their homes in the north in order to be close to their children and grandchildren, but when the cold weather sets in, they travel to the southern states to enjoy the warmer weather. By continually repeating this cycle, they have their move down to a simple routine and therefore tend to consider their time in the sun as a vacation, perhaps forgetting that their health status can change or that they may need access to care when they are in the secondary residence. Some seniors go unprepared – leaving without checking with their treating physician(s) or failing to line-up a physician at their new location in advance of needing one in an emergency. Therefore, it is important for you to prepare your patients for their seasonal shift.

It is a good idea to advise patients to have a check-up before the planned seasonal move. This may include obtaining refills for medications or helping them choose a local physician who can provide ongoing treatment for a chronic illness. In addition, it is important to either make copies of medical records for patients to take with them, or to provide them with a summary of their current condition and treatment plan. This facilitates easy transfer of information and can help avoid problems with medical record security compliance when patients transport the information on their own. Transfer of information among treating physicians is the key to avoiding difficulties or conflicts in care, especially as the season changes again and patients move back north. Physicians may send patients home with a summary of care for the past several months, and now the pattern of care shifts, and it is imperative that all treating physicians keep the lines of communication open.

To summarize, below are helpful tips in treating migrating patients who are either returning home or beginning their travel:

- Remind patients to contact you on their return and ascertain any changes in their health status or treatment while at their seasonal destination
- Post notices in your office reminding patients to notify you if they are traveling and to see you in advance for a visit to review their current treatment plan, continued care and prescription needs
- Provide copies of necessary medical records or a summary of care that patients can carry with them
- Assist in locating a primary care physician or specialist at their seasonal residence or destination
- Provide refills for medications
- Communicate with the patient and other physicians as needed

Alert your patients of the need to make healthcare arrangements before "migrating" - [Download](#) and cut out our sample flyer to post in your office.

Remember: the level of your involvement with your snowbird and sunbird patients may change with the seasons, but your commitment to continuity of care lasts all year round.