



Decisions, Decisions

Issues to consider when choosing a foot orthotics laboratory

by Bruce E. Williams, DPM

A broad spectrum of podiatrists, chiropractors, orthopedic surgeons, PTs, pedorthists, and allied health personnel prescribe and/or dispense foot orthotic devices. Many of these devices are custom molded and many are prefabricated. Some clinicians believe that over-the-counter (OTC) devices are the equal of custom-made, while others disagree. No matter what you believe, if you treat the lower extremity on a regular basis, you will more than likely need access to quality orthotics. Therefore, you need a good foot orthotics laboratory.

First, you must have an idea of what you want. Do you want high-quality, inexpensive OTC devices? Do you want sharp-looking, sports-oriented graphite devices that will impress your patients? What capabilities are you looking for once the device goes into the shoe?

Choosing a foot orthotics laboratory requires a dedication to acquiring information. Go to seminars at meetings sponsored by the American Podiatric Medical Association, the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine, or the Prescription Foot Orthotic Laboratory Association. Broaden your mind and ask questions. Relearn the basics, and open your thinking to new theories and ideas. Cruise the exhibit halls and talk to company representatives. Get quotes on prices and handle the merchandise. Is one device too bulky, does one look as

if it will fracture easily? Is someone using new material that is great for diabetics?

Sorting the Differences

What makes one orthotic laboratory better than another? The cost of merchandise is certainly important, because no one wants to pay more than necessary.

However, cost is only one component in what can be a tricky equation. Many laboratories grab our attention with amazingly low rates, but those rate may go up quickly once shipping and handling are added. Additions such as heel lifts, metatarsal cutouts, and top covers, can all raise the price of the basic device. This is understandable, because any modification takes customization time from an employee—and time is money. Then again, some devices may have a flat rate of close to \$100, but no increase in modifications, no matter how many are needed. Knowing exactly what you want will save you money.

Keep in mind that relatively small savings add up. For example, if you are spared the burden of extra customization charges, you may be able to save \$20 per device. At the podiatric average of five devices per week, that is a \$100 savings per week, which translates into a \$5,000 savings per year.

But remember, quality is important as well and the old saying is right: you get what you pay for. A device may look good initially, but do patients come in shortly after receiving their orthotics complaining of shrinking top covers or heel and forefoot posts that are falling off? Maybe the device was not trimmed to the right level of the metatarsal heads.

Check to see if the device conformed to your patient's arch? Did the laboratory fill in the arch too much or too little? The laboratory may be willing to correct these issues, but that means the patient is without their orthotic for a while. No one wants to deal with that headache for long. Consider requesting that the laboratory return the positive cast with the orthotics, so you can see how the device conforms to the foot mold.

If the device does conform to the mold, the problem may be with you. Remember that the laboratory can only make orthotics as good as the casts taken by the practitioner. Assigning blame for the failure of a device is a negative reaction, and will not lead to



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positive outcomes without open dialogue between the laboratory and the practitioner. The fact is that many practitioners do not take good negative casts. A good foot orthotic laboratory can make constructive suggestions on improving your casting technique. Do not be offended. If the advice is good, take it.

Not all laboratories prefer the same types of casts. Some prefer plaster, biofoam, or a computerized scanner. Obviously, plaster is the traditional method for capturing the most accurate shape of the forefoot-to-rearfoot relationship. Some practitioners have become adept at taking nonweight-bearing and partial weight-bearing biofoam impressions—and this certainly can save a lot of time and mess in comparison to plaster.

Many new laboratories are able to use 3-D imaging and scanning devices for taking impressions. If you make enough orthotics per week, you can get a cheaper rate by using these 3-D imaging services. You also save the cost of shipping both ways, since you can send a computerized image of the foot over the Internet. The laboratory then makes

the device using that image. After that, the product is sent directly to your clinic or office. Of course, scanning devices usually come with a higher initial set-up cost.

Failure may also result when the laboratory does not understand the terminology you use when requesting special changes or additions. Talk to the laboratory representative. Let them know what you want and why. A good representative will welcome the input to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Time Is Money

Turnaround times may be one of the biggest reasons practitioners leave their regular foot orthotic manufacturer. No matter how good the device may be, some people will not wait 4 weeks to get it. However, devices that arrive in less than a week can sometimes lack quality.

Some laboratories tout incredibly short turnaround times. Although if you ask you may find out that the devices are not custom at all, but off the shelf! To quote Jerry Seinfeld, "Not that there's anything wrong with that." But, if this is the case, you need to know from the start, not 6 months down the road when your "custom" devices are not performing correctly.

Educational support is another factor to check. Many companies will go around the country to educate and re-educate practitioners on how to take better casts, write better orthotic prescriptions, and give advice on what devices may offer better outcomes in certain situations.

Companies who offer strong educational support are usually stocked with well known experts and/or consultants-and it is always good to know who is answering your questions. Whether it is a laboratory person, podiatric consultant, or certified pedorthist, you want to select companies who have experts with clinical experience.

Along with all that expertise, look for choice. Some laboratories offer up to 20 different orthotics for every conceivable activity or sport. Some specialize in only one or two, but offer them in many different thicknesses depending on the needs and weight of the patient.

Many practitioners feel that a more rigid device will offer more control, while some want minimal weight and thickness which takes up less room in a shoe. You may want a special accommodative device or perhaps you favor traditional cork and leather. Choose a laboratory that can accommodate your preferences.

Choosing your orthotic laboratory can be as easy or as difficult as you want it to be. If you can't decide on just one, don't be afraid to use several. Remember that you get what you pay for and the results are reflected in your patient's eyes.

Seek out quality and service, get a good price, understand exactly what you want, and keep on learning. As Michelangelo said after painting the Sistine chapel, "I am still learning." And so are we all. ■

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