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Road Warrior Physician: A How-to Guide for Locum Tenens

Narrator:

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Mr. Rush:

Most doctors have heard of locum tenens, but very few actually know how it works. Dr. Noel Lumpkin wanted to change that with her new book *The Road Warrior Physician*. I'm Tim Rush and with me today is Dr. Noel Lumpkin. Dr. Noel Lumpkin is an anesthesiologist with CompHealth, and over the past decade, she has answered so many questions about her career as a locum tenens physician she figured she could write a book, so she did. She recently published *The Road Warrior Physician: A How-To Guide For Locum Tenens*. She calls Washington State home but holds licenses in 9 states, and she is currently on assignment in Alaska. Today, we are discussing the ins and outs of locum tenens.

Dr. Lumpkin, welcome to our show.

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Thank you. I am happy to be here.

Mr. Rush:

Dr. Lumpkin, it is one thing to say you know so much about a topic you could write a book, but you

actually did it. What inspired you to write this book about locum tenens?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, as you say, many of us say, “I could write a book on that,” but in working as a locum tenens, I have had many people ask me questions about it. In fact, several people have taken me out for dinner to ask me questions, and I have written down information, and I have had more than one person say, “You should write a book on this.” And I had a period where I had a few weeks off, and I looked at writing a book and learned that Amazon requires 15,000 words for a nonfiction book, and I thought, “If I gave myself 30 days, could I do this?” and realized I only had to write 500 words a day, and when it sounds like that, it’s really not so much, so I made a point that every day I had to write 500 words about locum tenens, and at the end of a month, I had a book. And it made me think about what I do and formulate it into something that was concrete and hopefully usable. So, I think anyone can write a book about something you know. You just have to make yourself do it and change someday into now.

Mr. Rush:

So going backwards, what was it that originally inspired you to work locum tenens in the first place?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, I did work in a permanent position prior to doing locum tenens, and I was at a point in my career where I was somewhat restless, a little bit frustrated with the way things were going. And by chance, I met another physician—an anesthesiologist as it turns out—who had a job where she worked 6 months of the year in an academic setting and 6 months of the year doing locum tenens, and prior to that, I had never known anyone that could do locum tenens as their primary job. So I started to look into it, and I thought perhaps this would be a better way for me, at least in the interim. I was thinking I would do this for maybe a year or 2 and it would allow me to look at other practices and see how they do things differently. And so I thought, “Well, I will give myself 2 years,” and I started doing it, and I found that the lifestyle suited me very well and still continues to do so.

Mr. Rush:

Back in my staffing days, I did recruiting for hospitals, army hospitals, in fact, and worked with a lot of nurse practitioners, physicians and physician assistants on locum assignments, and you’re right, there is a lot of terminologies that are new to a lot of the people I spoke with, such as the per diems and the travel allotments. So, what are the first steps that the audience needs to know about working in locum tenens?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, first, I think you have to think about why do you want to do locums or why are you thinking about doing locums. Some people approach it as, “Well, I want to work somewhere else a few times a year

so that I can travel to a new place.” Well, that’s fine. Those are going to be the short-term, 1-week assignment somewhere. Some people say, “Well, I want to be closer to aging parents or other family members, so I am looking at something I can do on a recurring basis, perhaps, over the next few years.” Well, that is a different type of assignment. And then there are those who see their own job in peril or, perhaps, have lost their jobs and they are looking for something more permanent, or at least long-term. So I think you have to figure out what your needs are initially before you start approaching the job market, because people say, “Oh, are there jobs out there?” and I am here to tell you there are thousands of jobs out there, and sifting through all that, depending on what your needs are, could be daunting. So figure out what your need is as far as locums and then think about what kind of jobs you’re going to look for, because the types of jobs out there also vary considerably from short day assignments or occasional 1- or 2-day-a-week assignments to working lots of call and lots of weekends, and we will all approach it differently depending on what our needs are. If you are looking solely for lots of money, then you can take the job with lots of call. If you want to go somewhere and enjoy time with your family, you don’t want those kinds of jobs. So I think you have to figure out what your needs are and just what type of job you are looking for before you ever make that call or start looking online.

Mr. Rush:

What inspired the title *The Road Warrior Physician*?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

I tried to think about how I would title myself, and I had thought of temporary, and I thought no, that’s not an exciting title for anything. And I was talking to someone in an airport when I was traveling, explained what I do, and it was actually a fellow passenger who said, “Oh, so you’re like a road warrior physician,” and I thought, “This is it.” I thought, “Thank you, my friend. You have just given me the title for my book.”

Mr. Rush:

That’s perfect. That’s perfect. What tips would you give someone who is going to be doing their first locum tenens assignment?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, as I have mentioned in the book, first of all I say, “Don’t panic.” People have told me, “Oh, I could never do what you do cuz I couldn’t imagine going someplace new.” And I say, “Well, you know how to do what you’re doing, right?” And they’re like “Well, of course.” And I said, “Well, doing locums is like cooking Thanksgiving dinner in someone else’s kitchen. You already know how to cook. You just simply have to look around and see what’s slightly different about their stove, their mixing bowls, where

they keep their spices and so forth. The outcomes are almost always the same. You're just going to cook thinks a little differently. And so don't panic when you're going to someplace new. Try and stop thinking about what makes it different and focus, rather, on what makes it similar." And also approach it with, you're there to help them. You're not there to teach them or tell them how to do things better. You're there to help them. And if you go in there with an open mind and willing to learn something new, you're off to a great start.

Mr. Rush:

You're listening to ReachMD. I'm Tim Rush, and speaking with me today is Dr. Lumpkin from CompHealth, the author of *The Road Warrior Physician*. We're talking about what doctors should know about locum tenens. It sounds like locum tenens has been great for you, but this lifestyle can't fit everyone. What questions should a doctor ask himself or herself before trying locum tenens?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, I think as human beings we are all resistant to change to some degree. There are those who can see change and roll with the punches and move forward. That's a good fit for locum tenens. At the opposite end, there are people who the slightest variation in a routine causes them to come unglued, not a good fit for locum tenens. I stress to everyone that I meet, and in my book in particular, the biggest thing you have to have as a locum tenens is flexibility. If you're used to your rigid routine and everybody at your hospital knows exactly what you need and when you need it, you're not going to find that when you go to a locums assignment, and so if you're not able to roll with a lot of change, it's not a good fit. I don't care if you have a Nobel Prize in medicine. If you can't be flexible, locum tenens is not right for you. And so I think that probably is the first hurdle that someone has to clear if they are thinking about doing locum tenens. And then that's at the hospital. Traveling, while it sounds great, living in a hotel for weeks at a time is another challenge, and if you're used to your pillow, your bed, your kitchen, then locums is not right for you. I think what it really comes down to is flexibility. And, of course, some people think they're flexible and they're not, so I think it's always interesting to have people tell me how they view their day and how they like their workplace, and if they're used to everything being just so with nothing out of place, locums is not right for them.

Mr. Rush:

Well, some of my customers are the largest national locum tenens providers, so the numbers of physicians moving into locums continues to increase, so there is no question that there are many benefits for doctors. But, what about the hospitals or the direct practices? What's in it for them?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, I always found it astonishing that hospitals look at locums as something that just fills a hole. It's

like plugging a hole in a dike or like the old-fashioned switchboards where they're simply trying to plug something in to fill something so it will work, and they don't look at the people who are coming into their hospital for, perhaps, the first time, or even after multiple times and ask their advice about who might fit well in that job. Maybe it is that person, but if it's not, they might know someone who would, and I find that it's a resource that hospitals frequently ignore to their own peril. They keep hiring the same kind of people and wondering why they're leaving, and I've told a couple groups, "I can tell you why these people are leaving. You're hiring the wrong people." And so I think hospitals should look at locums not only as potential candidates for those jobs but also as potential resources. And I think that someone coming in new for the first time sees things that, perhaps, have been there for so long, you don't realize that those are either advantages or disadvantages to hiring. So I think that hospitals should spend more time talking to their locums and less time worrying about simply filling a spot.

Mr. Rush:

I've spoken to so many locum tenens physicians that have found a new passion and a new joy for medicine in their life with the flexibility of locums. And you've got to figure happy people make great doctors, so well said. Are you a better doctor because you do locums?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

I like to think so. I think, going back to the flexibility, I've had people say, "We could put you in any type of case and you don't complain; you don't raise a ruckus;" and I think it does help you do that. I think it makes you focus on the task at hand rather than, "Oh, I don't have this piece of equipment or that medicine" or what have you, and I think it does make you more adaptable. And I look at locums like camping. You know, leave no trace. Leave only footprints, take only photos. And I think that you can fit into any kind of situation, and I think hospitals and practices appreciate it. And if you're thinking about doing medical missions, there is no better training than locum tenens.

Mr. Rush:

So, what's next for you, Dr. Lumpkin? Will there be a sequel to *The Road Warrior Physician*?

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

I don't know, at this point, if I will write another book. People asked me that right after the book came out, and I said, "It's kind of like asking a woman who's just given birth when she's going to have another baby." You know, I think it takes a lot of time and effort to get a book out, and I'm not sure what I would continue to write about. I don't know if I would write about locum tenens or, perhaps, maybe medical mission work, how you get into that and how locums prepares you for that. But I have found from the book that, much to my great surprise, I have found and enjoyed speaking about locum tenens, so, perhaps, it's another avenue that I might go with this topic.

Mr. Rush:

Well, we've come to that time. I want to thank you, Dr. Noel Lumpkin, for joining me today and talking about your book, *The Road Warrior Physician: The How-To Guide for Locum Tenens*.

Dr. Noel Lumpkin:

Well, thank you for having me. I've enjoyed it.

Mr. Rush:

Yes, thank you. I'm Tim Rush. To access this episode or others, please visit ReachMD.com and Become Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.

Narrator:

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