

Medical Thermography: A Guide to Establishing Your Own Medical Imaging Center

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Abstract

Medical Thermography has been around for several decades with varying degrees of positive and negative promotion, research, and support. Current trends show that there is a slow but steady growth and awareness happening within the conventional medical industry. In order for this important imaging modality to get broader recognition and acceptance throughout the conventional medical industry, more reputable imaging centers need be established.

This paper will discuss what is needed for anyone wishing to establish a reputable medical thermography imaging center that will benefit both patients and doctors. From office space to equipment requirements to training and certification, it will also touch on sales strategies and the expected return on investment for a start-up imaging center.

Genesis AKA The Big Bang

So you are thinking about starting up a thermography medical imaging business. The first thing you would need to do is find out if it is possible or allowed in your area. For the United States, a good place to start would be to call the governing business licensing agency. Ask if there are any laws restricting this type of business. Not many imaging centers out there actually do this, but it is a good idea to find out before you start spending the time and money to get your imaging business running. When you are doing this query, it may not be advisable to contact any healthcare board as they may see you as competition and might discourage you from establishing your business without any real basis.

Creationism or Evolution?

Once you are legally able to establish your medical imaging business in your area, the next step will be to select the medical thermography organization that you want to be affiliated with.

Just like any school, profession or belief system you choose, this decision will usually result in a lifelong affiliation and loyalty. The medical thermography organization you choose to be affiliated with has a direct impact on the success and longevity of your business. Although the theory and concept of medical thermography is universal, just as life and our existence is, the way in which it is applied and promoted can vary considerably between organizations.

In selecting your medical thermography organization you should ask yourself what you want your medical imaging business to accomplish and reflect. What is important to you and what do you want to be known and seen as?

Other factors weighing in on your organization affiliation should be the organization's professional reputation and acceptance; their contribution to the industry; whether their values and ethics match yours; their support system to ensure your success; their cost and fee structure; and their requirements for doing business with them.

As long as the organization you select matches what you need and want to accomplish, then there is really no right or wrong answer. It is what you will and must believe in, in order to move forward and onward. Now does this mean that your first decision will be the right fit for you? Perhaps not. How often has our first choice in a school or job selection panned out? We learn as we gain knowledge and experience. It is acceptable to question our decision as we move forward. Medical thermography and thermography on a whole is a dynamic industry. As long as your criteria are met in what you are seeking from an organization, then that is most important.

Once you have selected your medical thermography organization, you will then have to train under their guidance and instructions to gain the appropriate certification or qualifications to become a technician.

Rod and Staff / Camera and Imager

Equipment selection is a very important consideration to the continued operation and success of your business. In selecting your thermal imaging equipment, there are pretty much only two major criteria to consider:

1. Does the medical thermography organization you are affiliated with accept or use images from that equipment?

2. Is the equipment properly registered with the Food and Drug Administration for what it is being used and marketed for?

Depending on the organization you choose to be affiliated with, they may be the only ones who will provide image interpretation services for you. Without this service, you cannot operate or function. Some organizations will only work with a specific type of equipment that must be purchased from them. Other organizations do not sell equipment and will accept images from equipment that is capable of capturing quality images and data that meets a stipulated minimum quality guideline or standard. Since equipment is basically the heart of your business and can be a very expensive investment, you should carefully analyze this option and select the appropriate equipment.

Apart from the organization you have aligned with, there is the legal aspect of the business that you must consider. The US FDA has mandated that all medical devices must be registered with them and a very specific "Indications For Use" must be specified and approved. This is known as the 510(k) Clearance. This FDA requirement for equipment does not require you to do anything. It is the responsibility of the equipment manufacturer or seller to register the equipment with the FDA.

The part that directly affects you and your business is how you market and use that equipment. If you market and use the equipment in a way that does not specifically match what the manufacturer or seller stated it should be used for with the FDA (this is listed as the Indications For Use), then you can essentially have problems with the FDA which can result in the halting of your business activities.

To be safe and to avoid ambiguity, you should look at the "Indications for Use" of the equipment you are looking at acquiring and ensure that your specific application and use is listed. For example, breast cancer screening, neuromusculoskeletal disorders, etc. The more vague the listed indications for use are, the more chance that the FDA may not approve of how you are using and marketing your equipment and business.

There are other considerations when selecting the right equipment for your business such as specifications; however, the medical thermography organization that you have selected will have these guidelines for you.

Six Thousand Years or 4.5 Billion?

Now that you have your approvals, training, affiliation and equipment, the next phase or step is to actually establish your business. The timeframe you set or actually take is all "relative". The following should be considered:

1. Office location and space:

You should have your medical imaging office in a location that is easily accessible to the public and preferably should be situated near other medical establishments. Your office space should be adequate enough to incorporate a reception and waiting room, imaging room and also private consult office. For medical applications, it may be cheaper and easier to rent or lease from an already established medical office or lab and use their in-house facilities.

2. Practice and perfect your skills and knowledge:

Before you start with real patients, you should be fully capable of dealing with them. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the office and equipment. Be comfortable in your environment and with your equipment. Practice on friends and family members for the proper imaging positions and also proper patient dialogue and interaction. It is important that your patients feel secure that you are confident in your abilities and knowledge.

3. Market and sell your services:

Patients make your business so you must market to them and sell to them. Do not immediately try to market or sell to doctors as this will discourage you. Know your demographic and focus on them. There are so many different ways of marketing and you need to find what works for you and your area. Local radio talk shows or pod casts have shown to be effective as a short term marketing tool; billboards are also effective and long term, but you should consider frequent cycling of the artwork display to keep attracting attention; public speaking at small functions, groups or meetings on breast cancer or health issues also helps; and so do direct mailings. In the beginning, marketing is hit or miss but eventually you will find what works. And until you build an adequate and sustaining patient list, never, ever stop marketing and selling.

4. Find your ally:

Once you have built momentum from your marketing and sales efforts and you have a good amount of initial patients, you should find a medical professional such as a Medical Doctor or Doctor of Chiropractic who understands and believes in thermographic imaging. Work to support each other in your practices. Remember that you can offer valuable information to these doctors to help them help their patients. Soon they will be referring patients to you. Start with one doctor and build on that, then you can look at finding your second and third doctor.

Unfortunately, The Root of All Evil is the Necessity to Do Good

In order for you to stay in business and keep helping patients and doctors alike, you must be profitable. Unless you are being fully funded or sponsored by an organization, you have no choice but to make money to stay alive. The question that I am frequently asked is: "Is there is money to be made in medical thermography?" The short answer is yes, there is. However, the more appropriate question should be: "Is there a lot of money to be made in medical thermography?" Unfortunately, there is no short answer to this.

'You reap what you sow' is really the best answer to that question. You must put in the constant effort to keep this type of business profitable. The person that profits the most (monetary wise that is) will always be the organization or doctor performing the interpretation service. This is because the interpreter is essentially reading images from many other imaging centers like you. There's really nothing you can do about that and you should not let that distract you from your goal. In the beginning, you should think of medical thermography as a supplemental source of income. As you build and grow you may decide to keep it as a supplemental source or you may see it as the primary source. It really depends how much you successfully put in and get out of it. The following is a rough projection of potential earnings for the first year after you have achieved steps 1 through 4 mentioned above:

Average cost to patient for Breast Thermographic Imaging	=	\$ 225
Average cost to you for interpretation services	=	<u>\$ 55</u>
Gross income per Breast Thermography patient	=	\$ 170
Estimate 24 patients per month as a conservative figure	=	\$4080
Less shared medical office space monthly rental/lease	=	<u>\$1500</u>
NET average monthly income	=	\$2580

These figures show a conservative initial income potential where you are only working 24 hours per month (1 hour per patient). Therefore, a conservative supplemental yearly NET income would be \$30,960.

How can you then increase these figures? That is where your marketing efforts and strategic alliances with doctors come in. With these efforts, it is achievable to even double these numbers. If your model works in one city you can even establish a second office in another city.

Apocalypse Leads to Armageddon

The medical industry can be a very unforgiving one to delve into. Credibility, ethics and accurate representation are essential to avoid costly problems and criticism. There are organizations and companies out there who are misrepresenting and misusing medical thermography. The following are my guidelines to ensure your medical thermography business and practices can withstand any attacks and criticisms from anyone wishing to see you fail:

1. Always promote medical thermography as an adjunctive technology.
2. Never negatively portray any other imaging or screening technology.
3. Recognize that thermography is only a tool to help the doctor in diagnosis.
4. Know your limitations as a technician. You are not a doctor and should not be giving advice to patients regarding treatment or their health.
5. Refrain from using thermography to promote products such as supplements, medication, treatments, etc. That is the job of the patient's doctor.
6. Thermography does not diagnose anything. It is only a tool to indicate signs of suspicious or abnormal physiological conditions.
7. You are a glorified photographer! Your job is to take the pictures, send it to the interpreter and present the report to the patient without medical advice. The patient must consult with their doctor for anything else. Do not stray from what is written in the report.
8. Always set money aside for your next infrared camera system.

Conclusion

From the information gathered, it is clear to see that establishing a medical thermography business primarily should be thought of as a means to generate supplemental income. It can also be a route to a more sustainable primary revenue source provided you are able to accomplish the mentioned goals. In my opinion and experience, one should not get into medical thermography solely because of the money. Rather, you should do it to help people. The amount of initial investment and continued work that is needed to establish, maintain and grow a medical thermography business can be quite considerable. The real reward is in making a difference in peoples' lives. Enter into this field with the right passion and mantra and from my experience the money will fall in place.