

# Why, oh why did I set up my own dental practice?

Ethicare Dental's Dr Glafcos Tombolis takes your hand and guides you through the ups and downs of going it alone



From the outside – looking fantastic and well worth the wait despite the hold-up on the completion of the facade



A warm reception awaits – stylish and practical, Ethicare Dental's desk complements the surgery's exterior



Cutting edge – the waiting room is the pinnacle of a simple, beautiful design

The inspiration behind this article came from a simple question from a slightly younger dentist who wanted to know whether it was worth setting up his own practice.

Of course, I gave the question no thought whatsoever and replied distinctly in the positive. After all, having set up my own practice – Ethicare Dental seven months earlier, I would have looked a fool if I'd said: 'No it's a real drag, your life will no longer be your own, the concept of a holiday is something that might happen next year, and you have 10 times the hassle as when you were an associate.'

So, if I were you I set up a dental practice? I will give my answer at the end of this piece.

## 'Silly money'

Dentistry has changed a lot since I qualified in 1998.

The model of setting up a general dental practice back then was to open on the NHS, grow a list, and then either convert to private a few years down the line or retain a mix of NHS and private patients.

These days gaining funding in London to open a practice on the NHS is nigh on impossible, which leaves the options of buying an existing practice, setting up a private practice from scratch, or uprooting my family out of London in order to get an NHS contract.

Buying an existing practice is easier said than done as the corporates seem to be buying them up or people seem to be paying silly money for established practices.

The reason why people are paying 'silly money' is that the uptake of private dentistry has exponentially grown.

Economically, times have also changed. We have a society in debt, employment has been

high, inflation low, interest rates relatively low and there has been a prolonged period of growth. As a result, people have had more disposable income.

The credit crunch and higher inflation have changed things and all the repercussions that have resulted mean disposable income will drop and it is likely that dentistry will temporarily at least take a hit.

The reason why I have discussed the political situation in dentistry at all, as well as the economic climate, is that these factors inevitably have an influence in answering the underlying question which is at the centre of this piece.

What kind of work and effort is required to set up your own dental practice in these times? I won't go into mind-numbing detail here. I will just give you a feel of what is involved.

For me at least, continuing to work as an associate was a must, though I did cut down from six days a week to four and then eventually on opening the practice to three. I worked out that from July to January 2008 when we opened I sent in the region of 250 individuals regarding the acquisition and received about 200.

There were numerous meetings with architects, lawyers, builders, accountants, financial advisers, bankers, interior designers, marketing consultants etc, prior to any refurbishment work beginning.

Quotes have to be arranged for all of these, and then of course when they start work, each professional is often dependent on the work of others. Which means if there is a hold-up with one, the whole process is delayed.

Fielding about eight 'usually crucial' phone calls a day whilst working as an associate

was quite a challenge and often a stressful process.

The decision about how early to tell my current employers my future plans was another dilemma, though I soon decided that once the deal had been completed honesty was the best policy and I was extremely upfront about what days I would be dropping and when.

Telling my employers at such an early stage could have been disastrous as they might have taken the view of replacing me as an associate immediately, but the goodwill I had built up with them over the last few years served me well.

Working to a self-imposed opening deadline was another frustration. A deadline which at first seemed easily reachable was cut to the line when the final pieces of equipment were installed the day I was seeing my first patient.

## Teething problems

Teething problems, usually involving computers or equipment, came along one after the other in the first three months – and frustratingly the final piece of exterior signage was not installed until three months after opening.

The last seven months have involved putting all the systems that you take for granted in place and more recently launching the specialist referral, hygiene referral and study group. All in all the last year has been extremely busy.

Setting up the practice was just one part of the puzzle, positioning yourself in an already crowded marketplace was the next challenge.

With two NHS/mixed practices in the immediate vicinity and quite a few other private practices in the locality finding a way to attract new patients was always going to be a challenge.

Decisions have had to be made about the creation of all our marketing material and website as well as what kind and how much to spend on advertising. Every single item of practice literature has to be adapted, proofread, kept current and checked to see that it is not misleading.

The formation of a specialist and hygiene referral centre as well as a study group has meant taking on an endodontist, periodontist, prosthodontist, oral surgeon, orthodontist and paediatric dentist which has meant creation of business cards, marketing material and designing adverts to publicise their existence to as many dentists as possible in London and the South East.

In every sense a lot of time and money has been invested in the creation of what we hope will become an ever improving centre of excellence.

So back to the question at hand. So far, I have painted quite a negative portrait of bleak economic times and an awful lot of hard work.

The truth is, the only way of knowing whether it is worth it is to know the individual who is embarking on the project, their personality as well as their previous experience as a dentist and what their circumstances are.

Even though we should make decisions based on what is going on outside our own little bubble that is not often the case.

Getting married, having children, selling and buying a house and setting up in practice were not decisions I made based on the rate of inflation, interest rates and whether or not there is a credit crunch.

Perhaps this is complacency, because we have not as yet had to go through really hard times, or because we cannot see the repercussions of our

decisions if things do not go as planned.

What I should have said to the dentist who asked me was...

- If you thrive off hard work, to the point of being a workaholic
- If you enjoy dealing with difficult situations and problem solving
- If you are OK with your personal life coming second to your business for a while
- If you are happy with taking calculated risks
- If you, on occasion, don't mind being unpopular

- If you know you can sleep soundly at night and make sound well-balanced clinical decisions during the day with stressful financial considerations hanging over your head
- If you like dealing with more than one situation at once
- If – finally and most importantly – you have the driving need to be the master of your destiny and have greater control over your environment then you should do everything you can to get your own practice. ■



Ethicare Dental is based in the East Putney and Wandsworth areas of London and is in the process of setting up a referral centre and postgraduate study group. If you are interested in referring patients to the practice or joining the study group, call 02088705059 or email smile@ethicare dental.co.uk.