

LESSONS FROM A SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE

A labour of love

Respected Harley Street obstetrician and gynaecologist **Mr Donald Gibb** shares his wisdom on the factors that made his private practice a thriving concern – and on his journey to achieve success



COMING FROM a Scottish Presbyterian background, private practice was never in my original plan.

In truth, there was never really an original plan except that the career aspiration of those in my birth milieu was generally in medicine, the law or the church. My father was in the church, my brother in the law and I am in medicine.

Business was not really a career option, but I suspect it may be in my genes from an uncle. After qualifying in Edinburgh, going to a house job in London was innovative.

While attending a careers fair during my house job, I happened to meet one of the consultants in obstetrics and gynaecology (O&G) at King's College Hospital. The same consultant was on the interview panel and I found myself in SHO and then registrar training posts at King's.

One year spent abroad in Zambia and two years as a clinical lecturer in Singapore after membership ensured a rounded specialist training in O&G. And picking up the Gold Medal in Part 2 MRCOG was always good on the CV.



Obstetrician & gynaecologist Mr Donald Gibb, founder of The Birth Company

Before private practice

In 1985, after returning from Singapore, I was excited to start a senior lecturer post at King's. My main responsibilities were in obstetrics, particularly in labour and delivery, and in teaching.

Then, in the late 1980s, I started to be asked to take on private deliveries. Often these were for women who wanted to be transferred to a private hospital for delivery – in most cases for medically indicated caesarean section.

Initially, these were few and far between, however the great satisfaction that one-to-one private care brought me was clear.

I had an interest in teaching in labour and delivery as well as fetal monitoring. This came to the attention of the medico-legal

world when I gave a lecture to a large group of lawyers and I started to be asked to give medico-legal opinion on child-birth related cases.

This continued throughout the 1990s. It was time-consuming, required organisation and was stressful in conference and in court. But I secured my additional income from medico-legal work and decided that private clinical obstetric practice was more onerous in out-of-hours time commitment and I would not encourage it.

Then – and even today – many doctors do medico-legal work in the peri-retirement phase. I felt I had the expertise and knowledge to do this from a busy clinical post.

The public deserve reliable

“ You have to work ON the business as well as IN the business. You have to think in business terms

”

expert opinion and I believe my work in this field has led to changes in practice. I learned a lot and improved my skills in organisation and logical thought in this work.

I also added letters to my name, becoming a founder member of the Expert Witness Institute (MEWI). This has not been a disadvantage in subsequent private work. Medico-legal work should not be seen as a spare-time interest.

Adversarial nature

Training in report writing and appearing in court is now available. This activity requires insurance through medical indemnity. It needs formal secretarial support and diary organisation. It is interesting and stimulating, but the adversarial nature of the process became wearing for me. So I reduced my medico-legal work as my clinical practice increased.

Through the 1990s, my private clinical work gradually rose. In the mid-1990s, I had led a teaching session in a small private hospital with a predominantly midwifery-led service when I was asked to assist in the support of a doctor approaching retirement.

This gave me the opportunity to attract some patients of my own and my practice grew. I started to feel secure enough to cut back my NHS commitment from nine sessions to six.

Although I consulted in one place, I had clients for labour and delivery in two hospitals, one mile apart. In 1998, I took a six-month unpaid sabbatical from my NHS post to do some educational work but also to have the freedom in private work.

After my return from that refreshing break, NHS work had lost its attraction and I finally resigned from the NHS with effect from midnight on 31 December 1999, also the month of my 50th birthday.

Of course, I believe my time in the NHS was invaluable in gaining experience and stature, but I have no regrets about leaving. I think change and evolution are the key to personal development.

The challenge of business

The late 1990s witnessed the inception of the internet. A website was a new concept and I

“ I believe my time in the NHS was invaluable in gaining experience and stature, but I have no regrets about leaving

”

THE WEB IS WHERE IT'S AT

The Internet

My practice has developed in parallel with developments on the internet.

On our registration form for all clients to complete on arrival in the clinic there is an item asking 'Where did you hear about us?' In more than 80% of instances, this is the internet.

Although I have a few valuable contacts with GPs and other specialists, the fact is that modern society is internet-based. We all use the internet for booking flights, booking hotels, shopping and personal services. The clients go looking for information themselves.

This is another important role of a website: to provide information about the medical conditions in question. A website should be informative but in a relatively narrow-focused way.

It should be warm and friendly. Library photographs are cold and uninviting. Invest in a good photographer for website pictures. And always have a good photograph of yourself. More than one client has said they chose me because they liked my photograph!

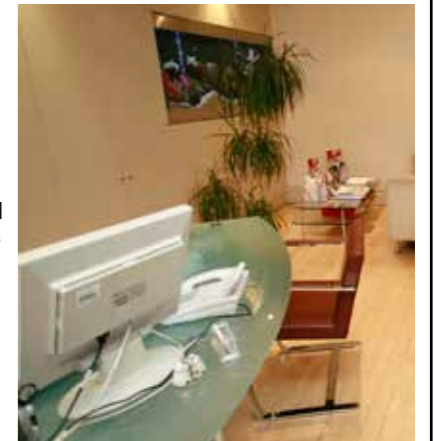
Include testimonials on the website and, respecting confidentiality, photographs of happy clients. This is easier for us because we have mothers and babies.

Google also rates websites for having a video on a site. An educational video, a video of a procedure, video testimonials or a video tour of your clinic are all possibilities. These should also be posted on YouTube.

You need to develop unique selling points (USPs) which set you apart from the competition. Your CV should be on the website, at least in abbreviated form.

In 12 years, we have radically reviewed our website on four occasions. This is important to keep a website fresh and up to date. As well as looking good, a website must be managed for business. This means a design that will be rated by Google.

A Google Adwords campaign is important, but keywords must appear regularly and frequently in the text. Professional help is necessary for this. I have chosen not to go down the route of Twitter and Facebook. That is for a new generation.



aisma
association of independent specialist
medical accountants

The Association of Independent Specialist Medical Accountants is a national network of firms advising over 3,000 medical practices across the UK. For some of the best advice available on accounting, taxation and pensions, visit our website and find your nearest AISMA accountant.

At the heart of
medical finance



www.aisma.org.uk
or call Liz Densley on 01424 730345

Housden Group healthcare consultancy the commercial choice for consultants ...

Working with 'chambers' groups, GPs and other clinically-led organisations, and for NHS Trust Private Patient Units we:

- Deliver turnaround in complex commercial situations
- Unlock strategic value and build sustainable and profitable growth
- Design innovative and winning service solutions

Find out how we can help you ...

Housden Group
HEALTHCARE CONSULTANCY

m: 07809 738390 e: philip.housden@housdengroup.co.uk
t: 01962 679697 w: www.housdengroup.co.uk

⇒ p28

Take Control of your private practice billing



At Medserv we specialise in providing the highest standards of private practice billing services for hundreds of hospital consultants throughout the UK and Ireland.

- Online access to all your billing information
- Extremely cost-effective
- Charges are based on revenue collected
- Tax deductible
- Comprehensive reporting
- Completely confidential



Contact Ritchie Hunter on:
Mob: +44 794 960 9929
Email: info@medserv.ltd.uk
Web: www.medserv.ltd.uk



Business development & marketing support for Consultants & General Practitioners in private practice

Are you considering developing your practice to increase your private referrals?

Medici Marketing is an independent business development consultancy providing the following services for sole practitioners and working groups of Consultants or General practitioners:

- Project management
- Development of business models for integration of new service lines
- Management of website build and SEO optimisation
- Event management
- Customised marketing strategy
- Network facilitation
- Branding and logos
- Business planning and market analysis

For further information or to arrange an informal meeting, please contact Sue O'Gorman, at: sue@medicimarketing.co.uk or call 07985 456487

www.medicimarketing.co.uk

decided to have one called Donald Gibb.co.uk.

I then realised that people would have to know my name in order to access this, but if they knew my name, then they knew about me already. I wanted to call myself something else and also be business-orientated.

So I set up a company called The Birth Company at Companies House. This was the most inspirational thing I did. Initially, I did this because I was attracted to the idea of business. I did not activate it until two or three years later.

I also came to understand there were important tax advantages to such a structure. There may also be advantages in securing a succession: this remains to be seen.

Working as a business is the first lesson of serious private practice. Doctors do not normally think or work in business terms but it is essential in building up a practice. You have to work on the business as well as in the business. You have to think in business terms.

As a case in point, we are explicit about charges and have learned to ask for payments up

front. Our charges are published on our website.

We give all our pregnancy clients a contract for their care. Initially, I felt uneasy about this, but then we never had any complaint from our clients who were often business people themselves.

I would advise doctors to try to avoid bad debts. Take payment up front – even from insured clients. The administration of chasing bad debts is time-consuming and a real headache.

A clinic of my own

As my practice built up, I wanted a clinic of my own with which to identify. Fortunately, I was able to rent the ground floor in a house near one of the hospitals where I worked.

I invested more than £50,000 in radical renovation. This was important because it gave a style and identity to my physical environment. The style was wooden



floors, fish tank, modern furniture and a little bit of Feng Shui.

We had an extra room in this clinic and it was then that I realised that involving complementary therapists could be useful in

promoting a holistic image for my business. This served me well for a couple of years.

As my inpatient practice built up in the larger hospital, The Portland Hospital for Women and

Children, I decided to move my clinic to nearby Harley Street, where a colleague was renovating a whole building. This was a new opportunity to be grasped.

⇒ p30

IMPORTANCE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS



The Administration

The front office is first point of contact for a client, whether by phone or in person. This first interaction makes the first impression and is critical.

The phone must always be answered preferably by a real-time, nice human being. When the client enters the clinic, they must always be welcomed and the staff should be aware if they have previously attended or not. They should not have to ask the client.

Your investment in staffing must permit this. If the staff take a call when you are busy and say that you are going to call them back, then call them back as soon as possible. The client needs to know you care.

There is no doubt that a busy independent practice includes time-consuming administrative and managerial duties. Many of these can be done by the practice manager.

I am fortunate that my practice manager has been with me for 14 years and therefore is familiar with the practice administration as well as many of the clients.

There is a lot of paperwork. Careful keeping of the accounts and liaison with the accountant is critical.

We try to keep the practice as paper-free as possible and are aided in this by software for practice management, Private Practice Manager.

The growing bureaucracy also needs attention. The administration of my appraisal is put in the hands of one member of staff who also deals with audit in the practice. I find the computerised system of the Independent Doctors Federation is very useful.

Data gathered for appraisal is also of interest to the Care Quality Commission. We need patient feedback, which we collect for one week on a three-monthly basis.

CROMWELL DIRECT

0800 783 9229

A dedicated service for GPs,
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

- admissions
- appointments
- diagnostic tests
- adult and paediatric referrals

bupacromwellhospital.com/cromwell-direct



Again, there were serious financial challenges. We transferred the style and ethos to Harley Street. At this time, my biggest expenses were in rent, the second biggest in medical indemnity insurance and the third in staff.

A niche interest

I am fortunate in having developed an interest in the surgical treatment of women who suffer from late miscarriage. This started in the late 1970s and continues today.

My work on this has been publicised on the internet and women usually self-refer themselves to me. I often give second opinions in this field.

I have developed a particular surgical skill in Shirodkar Cervical suture and in transabdominal suture. A special skill is a unique selling point.

This is moving further forward in collaboration with a minimal access surgeon. We now offer pre-pregnancy laparoscopic transabdominal cervical cerclage. We would like to collect data on a national basis for all transabdominal cerclage.

A busy ultrasound practice run by sonographers is also part of Mr Gibb's brand



Innovation

It is important for the image of the clinic to be innovative and up to date. And we are fortunate to be involved in two innovative technological developments.

One of the most important advancements in prenatal diagnosis is being implemented. This is a maternal blood test for chromosomal abnormality: non-invasive prenatal testing. This only became

available in December 2012 and it is proving very popular.

We make very little money out of this, as the laboratory charges are high. But, in spite of this, I believe it is important for the image of the clinic to be involved in advances in the specialty.

We are also one of the first sites for the ibabyscan system of web transmission of the video obstetric ultrasound scan directly to the

inbox of the client (www.ultrasoundmanager.com).

This was trialled and tested in the clinic and is now available commercially. All women are offered this service as part of an ultrasound scan. It is a value-added item at no extra cost to the client.

The future

I would like my practice to continue as I gradually withdraw from clinical work. Clinical practice is a very personal thing, perhaps especially in childbirth.

When a practitioner retires, there is no obligation on the patient to continue with his replacement. It is their freedom of choice. The ongoing value of that part of the practice is therefore uncertain.

I also have a busy ultrasound practice run by sonographers under my supervision. This could form the core of a continuing practice. I have developed a brand and would like to see it continue. This is my final professional challenge.

It has been an interesting journey to a successful practice. It needs vision, investment, dedication, hard work and courage.

Taking calculated risks is an essential part of this. Even if an initiative fails, we will learn from it. I do not believe in luck: it is all about positioning and seizing opportunities. ■

Donald Gibb is a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist. He is owner and director of The Birth Company, 137 Harley Street, London

THE CUSTOMER IS KING



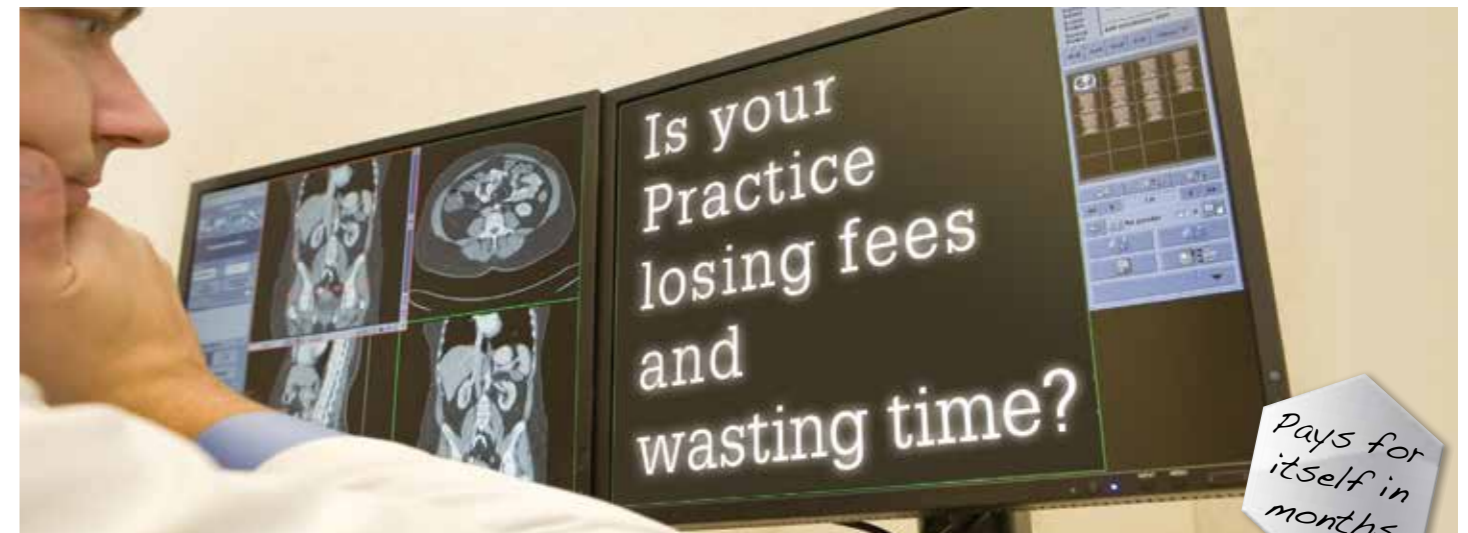
Complaints

We also need complaints and compliments. A file of 'Thank You' letters is kept. The assessors will not believe it if there are no complaints.

We welcome complaints and we also learn from them. If a client complains by email, which is the usual route, then they receive an immediate same-day acknowledgement. Within three days, after initial investigation, they will get a full response from myself.

The client is always right! If I judge there is an element of them wanting a refund of fees, then I will do this without admission of liability. This is the simple way to end a complaint.

I do not underestimate the time and expense of responding to long drawn-out complaints and potential litigation. One of the worst things that can happen for business is to receive negative feedback on the internet. Online chat can be damaging. Defuse and settle all complaints immediately and keep the record.



Stop the waste with 'PPM' – Private Practice Manager software and get complete administrative and financial control

Our easy-to-use software provides these benefits and more:

- Full support – no question too trivial
- Templates set up to your specification
- Pre-loaded CCSD and Bupa codes, categories and fees
- Full and speedy training and installation
- Optional secure e-mail and text messaging
- Optional integration with TDL (The Doctors Laboratory)!

For the consultant:

- Reduces losses due to invoicing mistakes and aged debtors
- Provides detailed medical analyses
- Pays for itself in months

For the secretary:

- Saves hours of administration time
- Gives access to data in seconds
- Produces year-end financial analysis in minutes



PPM SOFTWARE
PERFECT FOR YOUR PRACTICE
 t: 01992 655 940
 m: 07860 525 831
 e: tomhunt@ppmsoftware.com
 www.ppmsoftware.com

INCREASE NEW PATIENT INTAKE

We make marketing work, and we can prove it.

Just a few of the Harley Street clinics we've helped...

London Pain Clinic

The London Psychiatry Centre

ent

The Birth Company

Our six month New Patient Acquisition Programme delivers a modular plan that identifies what is exactly needed to grow your business, whether you are a sole practitioner or a private practice. We deliver ROI through advanced technical SEO and search related marketing.

Contact us today and we'll reassure you that your talking to the right people.

info@digital-catalyst.com
 or call: 0207 324 6248

DigitalCatalyst

www.digital-catalyst.com