



Neville Steer

Practice management

Tips from the toolkit: 1 – know yourself

High performance organisations review their strategy and business processes as part of usual business operations. If you are new to the field of general practice, do you have a career plan for the next 5–10 years? If you are an experienced general practitioner, are you using much the same business model and processes as when you started out?

The following article sets out some ideas you might use to have a fresh approach to your professional career. It is based on The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' 'General practice management toolkit'.

Keywords: practice management; doctor (physician) health status



Table 1. Investment yield from attaining a qualification in general practice

The intellectual assets developed through specialist general practice training in Australia are an investment worth more than \$1 million. This calculation is based on an unskilled worker earning \$50 000 per annum compared to a qualified GP who should earn at least \$150 000 per annum; the difference of \$100 000 at a yield of 7% is equal to \$1 428 571

The first place to start a strategic review is with your most valuable professional asset: yourself. On attaining Fellowship of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), the new general practitioner has been recognised as having the competence required for unsupervised general practice in Australia. The Fellow has 'a million dollar mind' (Table 1). How will you put this asset to work?

Know yourself

If we don't wish to be flotsam or jetsam at the mercy of the tides, we should actively seek to understand our own psychology in order to be effective physicians. We tend to take for granted that we understand ourselves.

Understanding yourself is an important step in becoming more resilient to the stresses of general practice.¹ Personal understanding is also important in developing and maintaining a professional career that meets your personal and family needs. Burnout is a significant issue in general practice and we need to take active steps to minimise our risk.

Countertransference is an every day issue in general practice. The undifferentiated illnesses and the chronicity of health problems in general practice can create negative feelings for the GP,

which are potentially harmful for both the patient and doctor. Similarly, dealing with patients' grief can activate grief that the doctor has also experienced.² Awareness of our deeper emotions enables us to acknowledge and minimise the effect on a patient interaction.

A large proportion of Australian GPs experience high levels of stress to the extent that half of GPs in a study by Schattner and Colman³ had considered leaving the profession due to occupational stress. Importantly, practice management issues rank highly as a cause for stress. As a comparison, a study of managers in alcohol and other drug treatment services found only one-fifth were considering leaving the field due to work related stress.⁴

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) is used extensively in organisational psychology and is widely available through psychologists. It is also available on-line at a reasonable cost (see *Resources*). In addition to being valuable in understanding yourself, it also helps to understand those you work closely with, such as your practice partners and personal partner. If you are working with someone who has a different personality style, recognising this type will help in understanding and maintaining good relationships.

Motivations and job competencies

There are many reasons for medical students and junior doctors choosing general practice as a career. There is a large body of work in the field of organisational psychology that helps us to understand how we choose and engage in a professional career. Examples include Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs',⁵ Herzberg's 'two factor theory'⁶ and Bandura's 'social learning theory'.⁷ Schein⁸ proposed eight career anchors that people develop and which remain stable over time. Some have a lifestyle anchor which seeks to integrate work and social aspirations, while

others have a general management competence where they enjoy organising people, problem solving, taking responsibility and producing results. A doctor who has entrepreneurial creativity will seek new business ventures such as developing a chain of practices, whereas someone who is anchored toward lifestyle is more likely to seek out an assistant position which has flexibility.

Professional and life stages

Understanding the stages in a professional career as well as your own personal life can help with planning and responding to different needs. How your work is arranged needs to be responsive to personal needs, such as having children, further study or other interests. As you get older you may wish to increase or reduce your clinical work.

A personal business plan

Apparently a famous Harvard study showed that graduates who had written plans ended up earning 10 times more than those without plans. Unfortunately, this is a myth and the study was never done! Fortunately, another study⁹ was stimulated by the discovery of the myth and this found not only did a written plan improve the probability of achieving goals, but there is also a positive effect of accountability by sending progress reports to a significant person.

Review your professional career management by performing the activities listed in *Table 2*.

Resources

- The RACGP General practice management toolkit. Available to purchase from www.racgp.org.au/publications/tools
- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Available to purchase from CPP Asia Pacific Pty Ltd, PO Box 810, Parkville, Victoria 3052; or can be administered by accredited MBTI practitioners (a list of accredited practitioners can be found at www.ausapt.org.au).

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Table 2. Career management tasks

Perform an analysis of your:
• personality type
• motivations
• needs
Perform a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of your professional and personal life
Write a career plan with goals and timelines
Talk to someone who can act as a mentor

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