“Practice management is a full-time job”

An interview with dentist and author Dr Michael Young, UK

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By Daniel Zimmermann

What inspired the title and what was your book planned this way from the beginning?

In the West, Genghis Khan is considered to be a dictator and brutal conqueror. Why did you choose him as main inspiration?

Dr Michael R. Young (DTI/Photo courtesy of Yorkshire Post Newspapers Ltd, UK)

According to your book, all aspects of a dental practice should be controlled by the dentist. Is that something that professionals nowadays tend to neglect?

What can be entirely on the delivery of treatment and advice to your patients.

However, if for whatever reason, the dentist does not have someone to manage his practice, then he has to balance caring for his patients with the continuous smooth running of the practice. In some cases, this might mean compromising good clinical practice?

The idea of control cannot be emphasised enough. I think that any practice owner who does not have full control of EVER aspect of the business seriously risks

shouldn’t practice owners and managers be like that?

Applying military tactics to civil life is not a new concept. Von Clausewitz’s On War and Sun Tzu’s The Art of War are often cited in the business world. Why can these tactics be adapted to the management of any kind of organisation?

From the little I know, Von Clausewitz, who was a military theorist, advocated the involvement of and co-operation between the regular army and citizen soldiers, which in some ways is similar to the co-operation needed between the professional practice manager and the rest of the dental team. Everyone has to be involved if a strategy, whether it is in war or in business, is to be followed. The practice owner, manager and the employees must work together and all be heading in the same direction.

The Art of War by Sun Tzu is divided into thirteen chapters all about military strategy. As you read each of the chapter titles, you can’t help but think about the similarities between business planning and waging war: laying plans, the challenge, the plan of attack, positioning, directing, weak and strong points, manoeuvring, variations of tactics, moving the force, situational positioning, the nine situations, fiery attack and the use of spies. I see strong parallels. However, they all have one theme, and that is planning.

If you think of running a business as being at war, then every thing you do has a consequence, either bad or good. To win, you must reduce the number of bad or wrong decisions to a minimum; you are never going to be right all of the time. Recognising when you have made a wrong decision and not making the same mistake twice, that is, learning from your mistakes, are important attributes.

How much time can or should dentists devote to practice management without having to burn the midnight oil. There were periods when I had to bring my homework home with me and spend a few hours in the evenings and at weekends preparing cash-flow projections, or coming up with new business and marketing strategies.

Practice management is a full-time job if it is to be done properly, whoever ends up doing it. Dentists shouldn’t think that they could do both and still maintain a high standard of clinical care. Well managed to me means controlling the business, rather than being controlled by it.

“The idea of control cannot be emphasised enough.”

Your career in dentistry spans over 25 years. What are you doing at the moment and are there plans for a second book?

I now think of myself as a writer and author, so I spend much of my time writing, fiction and non-fiction. I’m also currently waiting for the results of the final module I took this year at the University of Leeds in association with the Open University in Milton Keynes in the UK. I’ve been studying with them since around 1998.

Actually, there are plans for a second book. It will be a sort of prequel, as it will be offering advice about buying and setting up a practice in much greater depth than I covered in the prequel, as it will be offering advice about buying and setting up a practice.

I definitely wouldn’t rush into buying my own practice. I’d rather do my homework and talk to as many people, both dentists and other professionals, to find out as much as I could about how to manage, before, not after. I would plan, which is what I failed to do all those years ago. I was setting up in a practice as an associate and one of the other associates announced that he was buying a practice. At around the same time, another dentist I knew told me that an orthodontist friend of his was working evenings in another practice and that this practice was up for sale. Without doing any of the things I urge my readers to do, two months later I found myself the owner of a practice in a city I knew very little about. I had not talked things over with my wife. I didn’t have a business plan, I had not researched the market and, worst of all, I didn’t stick to a budget. I was lucky though because along the way I gained a new wife, a very business-minded woman, who changed the way I thought. She also made me realise how important it was to manage my practice professionally.

Your practice is called the dental practice without practice owners take the time to step back and analyse what is really happening in their business. Medium and long-term problems inevitably take priority over medium- and longer-term planning. Again, planning is really important. I suppose you could say that in some ways the biggest mistake made when managing a dental practice is not managing it all.

You describe many personal experiences in your book. What do you consider your biggest mistake and, if you could start a dental practice now, what would you do differently?

I wouldn’t do things in the same way from the beginning.

That’s a big question. You could take anything to do with managing a practice and find something about it that dentists don’t do right. As I mention in the preface of my book, very few practice owners take the time to

Dentists who want to manage their own practice are faced with a challenge, Dr Michael Young knows. The former dentist from the UK recently published his experiences in a book entitled Managing a Dental Practice the Genghis Khan Way, which was awarded the Bookseller/Diagram Prize for Oldest Title of the Year. DTI Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann spoke with him about his book, the importance of planning and applying navy tactics to dental practice.

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Actually, there are plans for a second book. It will be a sort of prequel, as it will be offering advice about buying and setting up a practice in much greater detail and depth than I covered in Managing a Dental Practice the Genghis Khan Way. I am also interested in the use of social networking sites as a way of disseminating information and promoting a business.

Thank you very much for this interview.