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“Practice management is a full-time job”

An interview with dentist and author Dr Michael Young, UK

By Dr Richard F. Young (DTI/Photo courtesy of Yorkshire Post Newspapers Ltd, UK)

Dentists who want to manage their own practice are faced with a lot of day-to-day business, as Dr Michael Young knows. The former dentist from the UK recently published his experiences in the book Managing a Dental Practice the Genghis Khan Way, which was awarded the Bookseller/Diagram Prize for Oddest Title of the Year. DTI Group Editor David Zimmerman chatted with him about his book, the importance of planning and applying Sun Tzu’s tactics to dental practice.

Daniel Zimmermann: Dr Young, your book recently won the Bookseller/Diagram Prize for Oddest Title of the Year. It is now ranked with previous winners, such as The Big Book of Lesbian Horse Stories and American Bottom Archaeology. Were you surprised by the nomination?

Dr Michael Young: Actually, I didn’t even know that such a prize existed. I was even more surprised when I won. I must thank my editor, Gillian Nineham, and all of her team at Radcliffe Publishing in the UK for having had faith in my initial draft manuscript, and for letting me stick with the title.

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

I figured that I wanted my book to be different, and calling it How to Manage a Dental Practice wasn’t going to make it stand out from the crowd. From the outset, I had this idea about a dental practice being managed in a very direct, hands-on, almost ruthless way just because that was the way eventually I managed my practice. So I came up with the idea of Genghis Khan.

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

As you can imagine, I came across mostly negative perceptions of Genghis Khan and his military campaigns. However, tucked away amongst all the bad press, there were some positive perceptions, which I felt fitted nicely with the Genghis Khan I had in mind. He seems to have operated a meritocracy-based system, acknowledging and rewarding the skills and attributes of his soldiers. Rather than keeping them in the dark about what he was planning, he explained the objectives and the plan of action, which is definitely something a good practice manager should do.

From quite early on in his career, Genghis Khan gathered good people around him and tried to understand the motivation of his rival (vital in marketing if you are going to steal a march on your business rivals). He was a quick learner who would adopt the new technologies and ideas that he came across, and this is relevant to dentists in relation to both management and clinical dentistry.

There is also a suggestion that he was a charismatic and, dare I say, it, an inspirational leader, who led from the front, 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, is important attributes. 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?

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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?

The idea of control cannot be emphasised enough. I think that any practice owner who does not have full control of EVERY aspect of the business seriously risks 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 having to burn the midnight oil. There were periods when I had to bring my paperwork 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. However, if you employ a practice manager, either full- or part-time, good clinical care will not be compromised. In fact, if you are a dentist who has tried to juggle clinical care and managing the business, bringing in a manager will actually improve the standard of clinical care. Your focus can then be entirely on the delivery of treatment and advice to your patients.

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How much time can or should dentists devote to practice management without compromising good clinical practice?

That’s a big question. You can 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 step back and analyse what is really happening in their business. Having a manager will help with many obstacles, as Dr Young stated.

You describe 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 definitely wouldn’t rush into buying my own practice. I’d rather be managing it as an associate and one of the other associates announced that he was buying a practice. 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 and made me realise how important it was to manage my practice professionally.

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 writing for the results of the final module I took this year, the Open University in Milton Keynes in the UK. I’ve been studying with them since 1998. Actually, there are plans for a second book. It will be a sort of sequel, as it will be offering advice on reorganisation, putting 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.