

PRIVATE PRACTICE

Long-distance management

Outsourced administrative services are making life easier for a growing number of consultants with a private practice. **Mack Watson** reports



Mr Mo Akmal keeps his diary up to date via an Internet link

With his private practice growing, consultant orthopaedic spinal surgeon Mr Mo Akmal was in danger of spending as much time on admin as on his patients.

He looked into sharing a secretary with another consultant, using his NHS secretary a little more, or even investing in an office and private secretary.

A proliferation of software packages were also available, all claiming to offer services adaptable to the busy life of a private consultant. But while many allowed him to complete tasks faster, they didn't actually remove the administrative workload.

Mr Akmal, of St Mary's Hospital NHS Trust, London, eventually discovered an unexpected solution to his

problem – he took on a practice manager.

But he won't be seeing her much, if at all. Alison Ryan is based some 150 miles away in Nottingham. The unusual arrangement, made through a service launched last autumn by a practice management consultancy, appealed because it was a dedicated service rather than an off-the-shelf piece of software.

Mr Akmal explains: 'Good customer service is essential in any business. In my case it is my interaction with my patients as a doctor, but there is also the customer service my patients experience when booking, keeping and completing appointments.

'Couple that with the

billing and general correspondence and even with the best will in the world, I cannot offer that service at the level I would like to by doing it myself.'

Complete service

Virtual Practice Management (VPM), from management consultancy company PHF, offers a complete service, including proactive diary management and transcription together with invoicing, payments processing and even bad debt management.

After working with his remote manager for six months, Mr Akmal finds the geographical distance between them presents no problem, as the essential parts of his practice are all

available online, supported by a secure login area accessible from a standard dialup or broadband internet connection.

Of course, there is little point in running a practice more efficiently, with a greater and more satisfied number of patients, if the extra income is eaten up by the cost of the service.

Mr Akmal told *Hospital Doctor*: 'My practice was still in its infancy so I was pleased to learn that VPM was charged purely on a "pay as you use" basis, so essentially I could not be out of pocket. Also, because the service is delivered online I would be able to view my diary and patient notes at any time and then sync it to my PDA'.

The company states that although fees are charged on a pay as you go basis, they will not exceed ten per cent of total income and will vary according to the size and complexity of each practice.

Mr Akmal admits to having some initial concerns about the move. 'In a traditional consultant-secretary relationship, the proximity allows for an easy administration flow in terms of handling receipts and mail and for general discussion and reviews. There is also control over the recruitment process and a certainty in the ability of the person answering the phone on your behalf.

'However, I have been very impressed with the competence of my manager,

who has over 14 years of practice management experience and a further six years in private healthcare administration'.

He says the speed, consistency and accuracy of the transcription service has been a major highlight, plus the fact that his private practice is available permanently for himself and his patients. 'I also feel that I can be quite demanding of PHF as there is a greater degree of accountability fostered through our business relationship'.

Full attendance

So far he reports a zero non-attendance rate in his practice because his manager issues patient reminders while coordinating his

diary and appointments.

'I am running a business here so a professional practice management solution has been vital in keeping my costs down and conveying a professional image while I establish myself,' says Mr Akmal.

He reckons his NHS patients have also benefited from the greater efficiency in his time management and through him bringing new management techniques to the health service.

'Communication with my NHS secretary has improved, meaning my NHS admin, research and teaching tasks have all been better coordinated,' he says. ■

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Practice manager Alison Ryan works 150 miles away