

Dr. Jack Bassey on owning a practice

Dr. O'Keefe: Today, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Jack Bassey and he's a general practice dentist in Winnipeg, Manitoba. And he's going to talk to us about his experiences with practice ownership. And he's had a couple of different types of experience starting one from scratch as I understand it, and also buying a practice. So Jack, would you just tell us a little bit about your professional career trajectory to date, please.

Dr. Bassey: So, I started in 1985, graduated from University of Manitoba as a general dentist and at that time, when I was graduating, I was contemplating what career path I was going to do and how I would direct myself. My thought process at that time was I wanted to get going and own my own practice. I wanted to be able to control the environment that I wanted to work in and I didn't want to be, I didn't want to have somebody else to dictate my environment.

Dr. Bassey: So, I basically... I had grown up with a father actually that owned a number of drug stores and so he always said to me, you should work for yourself because that's the way he did his entire career. So, I had that sort of mentorship from my father. And using that advice, I had sort of looked at how I was going to be able to achieve my goal, which was to be able to own my own practice successfully and control my environment. So, at that time I really understood that the cost of and the reasonable, or the reality of owning your own practice isn't that easy to start off with without having some sort of patient base. So, I sort of uniquely looked for a patient base, which I found in a rural area, which I could go to a couple of days a week, which gave me a patient base which developed my skills.

Dr. Bassey: And it also allowed me to take the financial burden away from my urban, my city practice, which was developing, and I could just leave alone and let that grow and morph into its own entity. But by having an existing rural practice that I could go to, it allowed my skills to improve. It gave me enough of an economic return that I could live on that alone and not, not be saddled with the debt that I had in the city area.

Dr. O'Keefe: And today, do you have both practices still or have you focused on the city practice?

New Speaker: So, what happened with me is that I ran, I started in 1985 and for the next six years I was going from rural to city, back and forth trying to manage both practice. We had a child in 1990 which dictated your life a little bit and so that next year trying to run back and forth became a bit too hectic from a family life standpoint. Also, my city practice had exponentially grown in that six years, I was actually able to eliminate all the debt in the practice. So I simply stopped going out to the rural area and ended up selling that practice to another dentist and just concentrated on my city practice, which is the same practice I'm in still

to this day. So that model that I set up really worked from what I believe is a clinical skills development and from an economic model, that really helped me get to the point where I am today.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right. And was there as much student debt in your day as there seems to be now?

Dr. Bassey: Quite interesting, you know, I have a son that just finished going through dental school and he is actually doing a residency in oral surgery now. And so in my day, in 1985 when I graduated my debt load, just for relative comparison, I had a \$6,500 student loan. That was it. Now, some of the students today have up to \$250,000 or more. There are economic scales of course, cars were cheaper, things were cheaper, but the kids have, or the students have tremendous debt coming out of school now.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, you had a lot less debt and so the, even just the idea of starting a city practice from scratch was probably more of an option for you than it may be for people today.

Dr. Bassey: Oh, I think that it's completely was the option that I had, and I don't see how somebody can really do that today. Now, economically interest rates are lower today, but the cost of opening a practice today with all of the standards that we have to maintain are just prohibitive.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right, right. And the real attraction for you of practice ownership was that independence, and you'd had that guidance and you'd seen the model of your father in operation, were there any other aspects of practice ownership that particularly attracted you?

Dr. Bassey: Well, I didn't want anybody to dictate the type of dentistry I was going to do. Right. I want it to be able to control that. I felt that trying to be as clinically excellent as I possibly could and treat my patients with fairness and respect were two things that I really wanted to achieve, and I didn't want to have somebody else tell me what I should be doing or how I should be doing it.

Speaker 2: Now, you have a busy practice today. You have a number of other colleagues working in your practice. Probably people have different roles. Could you paint a picture of a typical day for you in your practice and what sort of jobs do you do in there?

Dr. O'Keefe: Well, it's quite interesting. Typically, you know, you wear many hats when you arrive at the office. You know, I would say from a typical day was I'll arrive somewhere around 7:30. The staff will be getting there at that time. We usually spend, I usually spend a few minutes analyzing what I'm going to do for the day, looking at charts, looking at what I have, how I have to treat patients. And then

at 7:45 we have a team meeting. So typically, I work with two dental assistants, three hygienists, a couple of administrative people, and a float person that floats around in the office. We all try and get on the same page in terms of what we're doing. There are, there's a couple other dentists in office and they'll do their own individual thing. But I like to have everybody on our, in our team on the same page.

Dr. O'Keefe: And so, we have, we look at the way the day is booked. We know that there's going to be emergencies during the day. We try and figure out where we can put them to decrease the stress because we don't really want to have the administrative people bothering us if we don't have to. If they know where they can put somebody, then if we can preempt that and do that first thing in the morning, it just makes the day go smoother. I'll also spend a few minutes talking to the hygienist and I'll dictate, you know, I'll look at the patients and I'll say we need some radiographs on this patient or there's some handy treatment on this patient or there's specific periodontal needs on this patient. Whatever it is. If we can, I would prefer to do that before we start with patients cause I'd like that conversation done before the patient arrives as opposed to doing it over top of the patient. I just feel that it's better treatment that way.

Dr. O'Keefe: That strikes me as that you look at a chart you know the patient, you really are engaged with the relationship with each patient.

New Speaker: Yeah. It's, you know, I've been in the practice now for, well, almost 34 years, so I know I'd still get new patients, but a lot of these patients have been with me for now multi generations and I know them, I know them, I know their children, I know their grandchildren, now I know, I know their mouths inside and out even without looking at the charts. So, they really become a part of your life.

Dr. O'Keefe: And I like the way you say that you've got places in your day where you will tend to slot emergencies in, you expect them and that. What's your preferred time for seeing emergencies?

Dr. Bassey: You know, I would rather have the emergency in earlier than later. Like often we will get people in. Really, it's, I tell the staff it's pain or embarrassment are the two big centres for emergencies [inaudible] like. If somebody has a fractured anterior tooth, that's embarrassment. They want to be, you want to see them as quickly as you possibly can. And even if you can't treat them, if you can get them in early just to see what you have to do, you can slot them in later on because sometimes people will tell you that they have a huge problem and it's very small and sometimes they'll tell you they have a small problem and it's very large. The earlier we can see them, the better that we can form...Sometimes we can treat them right away. Sometimes we tell them to come back at whatever time later in the day, but it's much easier to see them sooner rather than later.

The last thing you want to do to see a patient, an emergency at 4:30 in the day when everybody wants to get out of there and you're tired.

Dr. O'Keefe: That shows a great respect for a person's problem and helping to get them past their problem, if I may say so. That's the concept underpinning that. Right?

Dr. Bassey: I think that's one of the greatest gifts that we can give our patients as dentists, that we can get them either feeling good about themselves from an esthetic standpoint or there's nothing better than getting somebody out of pain. They're your friend for life and it's a great feeling. We should never underestimate how much we help because we really are a helping profession.

Dr. O'Keefe: Now, I noticed from your bio on your website that you have a great interest in advanced restorative work and so I have to imagine that you have big cases, big reconstruction cases. Do you have any policy about what part of the day or the week that you fit those in?

Dr. Bassey: So typically, what I'll do with a case like that is that we'll treatment plan them, take photos, study models, all that kind of thing we do and then I'll spend time with them talking about their treatments on a one-on-one basis at the end of the day when I'm not rushed. So, I really enjoy doing that consult late in the day to set up for treatment. I don't want to ever see a patient that comes in that needs a complex restorative amount of dentistry and slot them in quickly. They have, especially if it's multidisciplinary and you're trying to explain what other specialists would have to be involved to make their whole treatment work. You want to spend the time with them. So, my ideal spot for them; the staff would slot them in sort of the last time of the day when I'm not in a hurry to get out of there. They can ask me as many questions as they want. And I think that just gives them all the answers without them feeling rushed.

Dr. O'Keefe: So important that the patient and you are essentially partners in carrying out that treatment, especially the complex cases.

Dr. Bassey: Well, you're very married to these patients for a long time and you want to make sure that they're looked after properly. And they want, you want to make sure that you've done all the diligence that early on in terms of treatment planning so that you don't have, miss anything, or omit anything.

Dr. O'Keefe: Well, when you and I speak about dentistry, you have a smile on your face. Jack, it strikes me you enjoy what you do. What do you like best about being a dentist and being a practice owner?

Dr. Bassey: So, there's a few things that dentistry affords you to do. It's a unique profession because one: we can help people. We can get them out of pain and we can get them feeling better about themselves, which in life, it's not a widget business,

this is an emotional, this is going to make them feel better, this is going to help them in terms of improving their day to day, the way they live in the world and function. So, if you can help somebody do that, that's a wonderful aspect. And if you can also do it in an environment where you control, where you're not dictated what you're doing, and you can set things up that allow you to also have a lifestyle that you're happy with. One of the things I think is really important dentistry is that we balance lifestyles and your own personal wellbeing as well as your patients. I mean you can't. I've had times where I've had dentistry consuming me, which is a mistake and I've been overwhelmed and I haven't let my person, and it's affected your personal life where you're just so tired. So, you have to be, you have to have that balance in life where you still have family and you have that family balance but you professionally do your services to the best that you can.

- Dr. O'Keefe: You have a son who's graduated in dentistry and I believe you have a daughter-in-law who's a dentist as well. What sort of advice would you give to those young people about owning a practice and the steps to take to practice ownership?
- Dr. O'Keefe: So, what I would tell young people is that if you're thinking of owning a practice, I think you really have to decide what you want to own. In dentistry there's areas where you can be either in an urban area or a suburban area. What type of practice? What do you want to do in dentistry? Maybe in an urban area you're going to treat people that are more in the working environment. You're going to see less families. Do you like to do pedo? Do you like to see families? Do you like to get involved with their life? You really have to look inside yourself and think, what type of dentists do I want to be like? Who do I want to treat? What would my ideal patient-base would be? That would be sort of think of that, you know, is it rural, is it suburban, is it urban?
- Dr. Bassey: Where do I want to be? So that's, that's what I want it to be. The other advice I'd say where do you want to live? You don't want to live tremendously far from your practice. I don't think. If you're going to be doing this and have a family, you don't want to be traveling a tremendous amount of time. So, think of where, think of the area you want to live. Think of the practice where you'd like to have that is see if you can marry the two together. An interesting side note: when I set up my practice in the city, what we did is I went and got a map of the city and put a pin in for every dentist. I color coded them by age where they graduated and I, I looked at where I want it to be and I knew I wanted to be in a corridor in the city that was allowed me an area to where I was close to live, close to my golf course, all that kind of thing.
- Dr. O'Keefe: So that's how I decided where I wanted to be. Kind of worked for me. The other thing I'd say that if you're buying a practice, if you're a young dentist and you're looking at buying a practice, you should physically look at the way that the

practice is designed. You should make sure that you can ergonomically work within that environment. You have to be comfortable because you live in that little environment all day long and so it's important that you're physically comfortable in that. And then you should look at the physical nature in terms of expansion. Because where you're at today is the practice is going to grow and you should have room for it to grow so make sure the physical plant itself is designed well. Don't, don't buy something you're going to have to reinvent again two or three years later. Make sure you're comfortable with that. Those would be just a couple of little quick points.

Dr. O'Keefe: Jack, as a final question in this conversation, I know you love golf, let's just mix metaphors here. Imagine you're on the 18th hole or on the 18th green of your dental career and you look back. What would you believe are the yardsticks of a successful dental career?

Dr. Bassey: From that aspect I'd say I practiced dentistry to the best of my ability. Like I have golf, I've played as well as I possibly can. And I've left my patients and I've left the golf course in an optimum, in optimum shape. And my dental patients have the best oral health that they possibly can if they've chosen to follow my advice over the years. They appreciate what I have done for them which is, it's a rewarding aspect of that and that they respect who I've been and how I've treated them over the years. And I think that if we can leave our patients and feel good about ourselves and they can feel good about themselves and be happy with the dentistry we've provided them, it's a good marker in terms of how well we have performed as a dentist.

Dr. O'Keefe: Dr. Jack Bassey, I want to thank you for taking time off on your vacation to speak to us today and pass on such solid advice.

Dr. Bassey: It's always a pleasure to talk to you, John.