Setting up in Private Practice (Clinical)

Before You Start

- Remember that you are still bound by the Standards of Proficiency issued by the Health and Care Professions Council.
- If you are an independent operator (that is, not employed by a private hospital or clinic) with your own records, you will need to notify the Data Protection Registry (www.dataprotection.gov.uk), as you will be processing personal data for health administration purposes.

It is also strongly advised that you:
- Retain your registration with the Health Professions Council for the purpose of seeing any patients, regardless of where you choose as a work-base.
- Register a page on www.freelancedietitians.org to advertise your business.

CAUTION – DO ENSURE YOU HAVE TAKEN FULL PROFESSIONAL ADVICE AS THIS FACT SHEET PROVIDES GUIDANCE ONLY

Have You Organised Office Accommodation?

- This is vital for you to get right. Investigate likely premises. Private hospitals, clinics, gyms, health centres and NHS offices (after hours) can all be successfully rented. There is no restriction on where you practise as long as you feel comfortable, professional and safe.
- Renting an office? Check what is included, e.g. telephone, appointment booking, secretarial help and refreshments. Is the charge per session, per hour or per patient? You may have to pay a capitation charge for sessions or even for empty slots in your clinic.
- Practising from home? Use of a room in your house to run a business may have implications for Capital Gains Tax and Community Charge, and you will need to thoroughly review your insurance policy. Consider car parking, toilet facilities, a waiting area, health and safety requirements such as fire exits, access for disabled people and the intrusion into your family life.
- Home visits can be costly, particularly of time. Also consider personal security issues.
- Do you need accommodation? As you may be able to work with clients via virtual clinics utilising the web, emails or telephone. If you decide to do this the same criteria applies as regards confidentiality etc.

Attracting Clients and Selling Your Services
• Contact medical consultants, GPs, local charities and support groups and local dietitians in as wide an area as is feasible and inform them about your services.

• With the way services are arranged changing it is wise to find out what is happening in your area as regards commissioning of services. The BDA has produced a “Commissioning Toolkit for Dietitians” which is to be placed on the BDA website.

• Business cards can be left in gyms and other clinics. Always ask permission to do this – alienating others at an early stage is not good publicity.

• Contact the local media to offer an article, using your business address as a contact point.

• Have you put together a brochure or other publicity material with which you can do a mail shot

• You may wish to develop your own website and link it to your business entry on www.freelancedietitians.org.

• Blogs can also be provided with occasional or even daily information.

• Consider how you wish to be contacted – by phone, fax or email, with or without your home address.

Making Boundaries

Decide on the following:

• What hours you will work.

• What availability you are prepared to offer to patients

• What range of services you will offer. Be confident to refuse work if you feel inadequately equipped to do it. Pass it on to fellow freelancers.

• What support mechanism you can identify (e.g. nominate a colleague or mentor) in case you get ‘stuck’ with a particular patient and do not know how to deal with them/refer them on

• What fees you will charge.

• What diet sheets you will use

• What is your work ethos

• How many appointments are appropriate

• What secretarial support are you arranging to purchase or do you plan to be your own secretary

• What arrangements do you have for upholding confidentiality, e.g. storage of patient notes (See note on Data Protection.)

Fees

• Decide on a fee structure using BDA guidelines to help. These are available on our group pages on the BDA website www.bda.uk.com. You may need some flexibility depending upon the client ‘market’. Review your fees annually.

• Do not undersell yourself. Your ‘product’ is your skill and this should not be given away. Work out your overheads accurately (include holidays, sick pay and costs of Continuing Professional Development).

• Print your fees and have them available. Never reduce your fee, once quoted, as this suggests it was too high in the first place.

• Some patients have private medical insurance. Be aware that not all insurance companies offer cover for dietetics. Others have quite a low ‘upper limit’ of allowance for dietetics. At the present time, most insurance companies offer some cover for dietetics but only if the referral is recommended by a consultant, not a GP.
• Always ask the patient to check his/her cover before the appointment, and invoice the patient directly, rather than claiming it from the insurer.

Invoicing

• Paying 'up front' is very helpful. If you have found rented accommodation where a receptionist deals with fees, consider a policy whereby patients pay at the time of the appointment.
• Payment may be by cash, directly into the bank, by cheque or by credit card. A decision needs to be made as to which modes of payment are acceptable.
• Alternatively send the account at the completion of treatment. Accounts can add up quickly and may be difficult for a patient to pay in one payment.
• Always include the referral source on the invoice.

Unpaid Fees

• This is your money! Do not 'write it off' without a great amount of thought or effort to reclaim it. Use reminder letters, final reminder letters and, if necessary, consider using a debt collection agency. These companies generally charge from 15% upwards of the amount to be claimed but, in view of the fact that you have probably paid rental fees to see a patient who does not pay, any money retrieved is a bonus.
• Most dietitians in private practice will 'write off' a certain amount of bad debt annually, but keep this as low as possible. It can become very demoralising.
• See the Fact Sheet – Top Tips for Getting Your Money.

Late Cancellation or Non Attendance Fees

• At the time of booking make clear to the patient that late cancellations or non-attendance will incur a charge. Alternatively this could be written on the appointment card or the registration form.
• Sending invoices to new patient non-attenders means that the unpaid bill can go down as a bad debt for tax purposes.
• Insurance companies will not cover missed appointments.

Register With Health Insurers

▪ It is a good idea to register your practice with healthcare insurers, e.g. BUPA, PPP and Norwich Union.

Accounting

• Consider employing an accountant or bookkeeper, particularly if your business is growing rapidly. Do not forget to value your own time if you decide to do your accounting yourself.
• Will you register for VAT? You cannot charge VAT on healthcare as it's exempt, although you may be able to charge it to organisations for supplementary services you provide to them. So check the rules with HMRC and decide whether you need to be VAT-registered.
• Purchase an off the shelf accounts book, use a spreadsheet, or a simple accounting software programme.

Setting up on a shoe string
Some dietitians may wish to set up private practice as a part time venture to link in with other employment or wish to start a full time business but have little funds.

There are a number of grants available such as the Princes Trust for people setting up businesses. Local authorities may be able to offer grants or support.

Banks may be able to offer start up business loans but will need a clear business plan. Writing a clear business plan will assist with examining proposals.

Items like cards or flyers can be produced in house or from websites offering free cards. Sites offer free blogs and posts. Some local business premises owners may be happy to have someone renting office space at minimum rent but paying the business rates which they could be liable for. Assistance and support may be provided by local business networks. Offers to provide work experience may assist with general administration.

Referrals

Referrals may come from anyone, including the patient him/herself. For some private practitioners this is the most frequent source of referral.

See Fact Sheet – Self-Referrals.

The medical practitioner must be advised of any therapeutic advice given to the patient.

- You will need to contact the medical practitioner to clarify or confirm a medical history and they may charge you for this information.
- For all referrals via a consultant or GP, remember that it is essential to write back to the referrer with appropriate details. Keep letters as short as is practical.
- Remind yourself of the difference between general advice as opposed to therapeutic advice.

Record Keeping

- Familiarise yourself with the BDA Standards for Record Keeping, January 2001.
- Records must be stored securely.

Continual Professional Development

- This is essential and is your responsibility. Keep records.

And finally – don’t panic if your clinic is not full! Developing a successful private practice can take anything from months to years. Even for well-established practitioners, there are highs and lows in attendance and referrals.

Most of all

- Enjoy yourself.
- Don’t take risks.
- Ask for help or advice from the Freelance Dietitians, BDA or a knowledgeable colleague
- Buy professional help when you need it
- Network with other dietitians
• Look at what dietitians in other countries (particularly the USA) are doing and see if it could be something you could replicate here
• Network with local business people at events
• Make yourself known to local groups and the local media
• Make sure that you take dedicated 'time out' for yourself.
• Remember you cannot do it all

References