How to Avoid Burnout and Have a Long and Fulfilling Career in Private Practice Physiotherapy
Grew up in Canberra, ACT with a passion for Rugby before a career ending injury decided his future would lie in other pursuits; namely Physiotherapy and the education and empowerment of his clients.

He founded Greater West Physiotherapy in 2006, establishing his first practice in the outer suburbs of Sydney.

This quickly grew to incorporate over 8 practices; all owned and managed with Irene Georgakopoulos, his business partner.

Together they employ roughly 40 full time staff, with modern education and a professional support network of GP’s, specialists and other allied health practitioners.

He has found a new love. Writing.

It is his way of spreading the collective wisdom of himself, his staff, his mentors and his business associates to the public.

Most of his resources are free as he believes that when you empower people, they make sound decisions.

It has grown his clinics immeasurably over the years.

Today you will find him splitting his time between his other great love, writing and directing for film, as well as the odd day on the gold course.
I love physio.

What we can do for people and what impact we can have in their lives should never be downplayed.

We are the mechanics of the human body. When done right, our intervention into peoples lives can turn their future around in ways even you thought wasn’t possible. We have the opportunity to be part of our clients lives for years in many cases, and in my career, I became depended upon as a source of information, support and positivity in hundreds of my long term clients lives.

My own career moved to the stage where I never took a new client, I only saw my prior clients and most of my weekly schedule was spent doing reviews, goal planning, maintenance and elite performance work.

A role I feel into and loved.

For many though, this path never comes. They become stuck receiving 5-10 new patients every week, they rarely see their old clientele and they are forever a “stranger” to their clients and work colleagues. The concept of burnout in Physiotherapy is alarming.

It takes a minimum of 4 years to become a physiotherapist, with many students nowadays spending 5 years to obtain a Masters Degree, such is the way of the University world.

I have been a multiple practice owner for 10 years and have seen trends come and go in the industry in only this short period of time. Once things remains the same, that is, things change. Techniques change, fads change, students change and the focus of the industry changes.

Here, in 2015 we are entering the great ‘dumbing down’ phase of physiotherapy. Evidence based practice is the order of the day from the regulators and educators (who are normally the same people) and there seems to be a lot of control wanting to be put in place of the Allied Health hierarchy.

I can remember back to one of the first lectures that I attended at University that gave me hope.

“It is our intention that you may be given the utmost autonomy once you have graduated”.

Meaning that we are given the necessary training to BE SAFE with our clients, then the rest of the gig is up to us.
We make sound and rational judgements to fix, cure and help our clients. Of course there are surgical protocols, of course there are critical illness and injury guidelines, but it seems that evidence based medicine has destroyed the fabric of our industry.

This is not intended to be a rant, but let me explain.

On graduating from university, I expect that most of the New Grads that work for my clinics should be comfortable in treating and “curing” for want of a better word roughly 70-80% of their clientele.

This is by the means of sound clinical reasoning, effective manual therapy techniques and effective exercise prescription. So one in five patients remain a mystery to the New Grad.

Speaking in evidence based medicine terms, this would mean that physiotherapists have an 80% strike rate as new grads in fixing general injuries. Or at least obtaining patient outcomes.

So in comes evidence based medicine. If we achieve a 80% strike rate in a study, we would assume it is an incredible success. Rarely do we achieve such results. But I push back on this somewhat.

What about the 20% that do not get better. Could this not be the same 20% that arrives at the local physiotherapy clinic needing attention.

Or at least a good percentage of time. If the difficult cases come into our clinics, then we could assume we are treating a biased group of individuals that may not fit the traditional evidence based medicine model.

I am not suggesting that EBM is irrelevant, but we should be cautious as to how much emphasis we place on it clinically. We should remain open minded to explore other options, and always look for a way to move forward with your clients.

Get a result. Get a result. Get a result.

There is nothing more to our jobs than this. We are here to fix our clients in any way that their bodies deem is the most effective way to be healed.

So let us bring back the era of autonomy, let us give our physiotherapists greater control over what they feel their clients need. We will always bat for the client, so I feel that the hierarchy should start to bat for us.

This manual is intended to guide you through my reasoning for why we are burning out in mass numbers. We have a short life expectancy, we seem not to have a tremendous earning potential, and we feel at times like our role is one-dimensional. I will try to help out in any way I can to assist you in making informed choices about your career and maybe give some motivation for change.

Good luck and keep at it!
Structure of the Physiotherapy Clinic

Aesthetics

I cannot believe how archaic a vast majority of physiotherapy clinics are. Old posters on the walls, plastic 1990’s furniture, wooden plinths, old sheets or terry toweling covers for the beds.

It is upsetting to say the least that we work in these environments! Now, doctor’s surgeries are even worse than ours, so we can take some solace in that. What would other developed countries think of some of our medical clinics in Australia. On many occasions when I have walked into a GP clinic for a visit to the doctor, I haven’t wanted to sit down as their cleanliness is that terrible. But the allure of a 1987 Woman’s Weekly usually plonks me down in the waiting room whilst I kick the 30 year old germ infested toys under the waiting room table.

This all sounds familiar, yes?

Aesthetics are incredibly important to the psychology of us as humans. We like to have trendy homes, we like to be in clean environments, we enjoy being surrounded by beauty.

A poster of an ‘unhappy triad’ knee injury is not a thing of beauty. Nobody cares of them, so let us start taking them down. Working in a clinic of beauty is something we can be proud of and enjoy coming to work in. Clinics need to have nice flow, enjoy premium furniture, adorn the walls with inspiring pictures and art. Surround yourself with beauty and your mood will be uplifted!

Double Handling Patients

I have purchased clinics as well as started clinics from scratch. Two clinics that I bought had practitioners that double handled and always have done since the clinic first opened. When I moved in, I told them the rules... no double handling. They were of course nervous about the reduction in pay, but clients always come first in my clinics. The physiotherapists left. The clinics doubled in size over the next two years. The average pay of the physio went up by 20% compared with when I took over. Their hours worked went down.

Double handling patients is the surest way to burnout.
Financially it seems like a great idea. See three in an hour rather than two and earn more money!

But it is not as simple as that. For starters, with this level of stress placed on the physio to do a proper job in treating the client, means that note writing, letter writing and phone calls drops dramatically. This means you need more down time or add hours to your schedule just to cope with the load. In addition, clients know they are being stiffed and the amount of return visits declines dramatically.

So the patients know they are being stiffed and the amount of new injury declines dramatically. And finally, the amount of client drop-offs increases. This is where they either leave due to feeling not valued or they search for a clinician that will treat them properly. It happens all the time.

So reduce your stress.

See one at a time. Increase the amount that you charge for those clients (they will not care paying more for better treatment).

And enjoy being able to write notes during your session and get through more techniques, more chatting and more relationship building with your clients. When they have you sole attention, they are better able to relate to you and will trust you more deeply. This in turn improves their treatment obligations, and helps bring in more work via their friends and family.

They will care about you!

Use of Machines

Let’s face it, we don’t really think they work. Apart from ultrasound in the very acute stages or when dealing with unusual blockages, machines are pretty much useless.

They only assist in us double handling patients. And now that you are not double handling anymore, time to throw them out.

I have a golden rule in my clinics. If you can’t think of something more valuable to do with a client other than use machines, you are in the wrong industry.

You should either reach out to seniors to learn more ways to treat those same injuries that you want to use machines on, or pack your bags and go and sell snake oil.

Don’t waste your clients time, don’t waste your own time and don’t waste the chance of great positive feedback that will come if you put the machines away.

No longer should we hear: “Physio? Don’t they just use machines and give a few exercises?” I have heard this many times.
Night and Weekend Work

Work life balance is a term thrown around. There are no rules for this in general. But for what it is worth I will give my two cents on what I feel has worked for my staff and for me personally.

We all want to be busy. Let us take that as a given. We also all want to have time to ourselves outside of work. Many times I see the ledger of work life balance with employees be pushed in the direction of the employee having to give up much of their nights and weekends in order to secure employment.

Ironically their boss is likely to be giving up the same things. You see, often when an employer has a particular habit, they feel that everyone should go through it to. So their life sucks, so your life sucks.

I personally hate working weekends. I also do not like working nights. But, alas our clients are generally working and enjoy coming in outside of hours. Frustratingly, we have allowed the community to see us as the flexible ones rather than our service being essential just as a specialist would be. When we ring a specialist, we say when can you fit me in? We take whatever time we can get. Then we arrange our lives around that.

I would like to see a greater confidence in our ability to make our clients understand that what we are doing is incredibly important. This way, they are more likely to fit in with your schedule rather than you fit in with theirs.

I have arrived at a compromise in my business where we work later evenings minimally, with no weekends and normally either two half days for my crew to make up for the later evenings, or a full day off so they only work four days.

When you are busy, your clients see it, respect it and understand you are in demand. They will likely return for their appointment, and you will likely gain valuable free time!

Try to work out a schedule in your clinic, share the evening work amongst all employees, making sure you only do a maximum of two per week. Early mornings are a good substitute for this and you will be surprised how many clients are willing to come to physio at 6 or 7am.

So limit the out of hours stuff, be fair and reasonable as a business owner and don’t expect your staff to have to do it just because you did. This way, your crew will stay working for you for longer, they will love it more and they will come in bright and bubbly.

Percentage Based and Fair and Equitable Pay

Unless you run a clinic that treats all private clients at the same rate of fee, percentage based pay for employees is destructive. I made a decision in my own clinics that we would not turn any type of client away. Medicare, Workers Comp or Private are all treated fairly and equally.

The only way for this to be truly kept that way is for the employees to be paid fairly was to figure out a sum they would be paid for each 30 minutes of billing. It didn’t matter what type of client it was, just as long as they were billing that time.

We also have a system of guaranteeing pay rates above the award rate so that the psychological pressure of commission is avoided. Sometimes clinics get quiet, and they all have mortgages, so we need to look after our staff!

I wanted to see my staff putting in as much effort with privates as they do with medicare. You never know where your next big referring doctor is coming from, it may just be from that free medicare client you saw twice and impressed them beyond belief!
The other benefit of paying per 30 minutes of billing is the concept of linear based pay. I am a firm believer in you get out what you put in. And this concretes that concept down. The more I do within my time at work, the more I make. And all of my clients are equal!

Support Network

Having a group of people that you can bounce ideas, frustrations, techniques and concepts to is very important. There are not many public forums for physios out there, and most of them are poor.

I have toyed with the idea of creating an online Physio and Allied Health forum for chatter about the industry to help out small businesses that may not have the reach that larger physio companies have.

Early on in my business, we put in place sharing inservices with other physio clinics in our area. This may sound radical, as you are coercing with the ‘enemy’. But it is not as strange as it seems. We see but a drop of the real number of patients who are out in the community needing our help.

Our aim in physio is to improve the overall perception of physio in the community, which will send double the amount of patients to receive physio care.

This is what helps our businesses grow!

So if you have only a small clinic and not the resources to have a support network yourselves, reach out to your fellow businesses in your area. You may be surprised that they are not demons, but people like you, wanting the same things in life.

Jump onto facebook and create physio communities with your old uni friends and share all of your musings!

Side note:

I would also love for there to be more effort marketing physio to the community from a central point. If APA fees went in part in running television ads, radio ads etc describing how the NEW AGE of physio without machines and with great manual therapy and cutting edge techniques is changing lives, physio would be thrust into a new era.

Co Workers Relationships

In short, get social with your colleagues. It has been a consistent trend in my business that those staff members who actively socialize in some way, being small or large with their co workers have the most satisfying experience at work.
They enjoy coming into work, they put in extra yards with their fellow co workers, and in general nothing is too much trouble. Patients feel the buzz in the clinic and your numbers of quality patients will reflect it.

If you work for a clinic that feels stale, ask your co workers to go out for a drink or dinner and set up a regular social outing. Race days, Friday drinks and karaoke are great places to start!

There is always a dread of combining your worlds, but it just makes for a more fun work week. We spend more time with our colleagues than we do with our families! Time to make them part of your family....

**Holidays and Sick Leave**

Making sure you take your prescribed holidays is essential. The difficult issue we have in physio is our patients like to rely on us, so they don’t want to see anyone else when we go away on leave.

This can be problematic for most clinics and regularly books will fall apart and take months to recover when staff members go on leave.

It is critically important to understand that your clients NEED PHYSIO or they wouldn’t be there in the first place. It is also important to talk up your co workers’ ability so that when you are on leave you hand your clients over to someone who they are looking forward to meeting.

It will give your client a new lease on treatment, get a new set of eyes on the problem and may even move some of your frustrations over to someone who may be happy to take on their care.

**Win win for everyone!**

So, in short, take your holidays and take them often. Minimise the impact this has on your return by handing your clients over to a co worker who can case manage them whilst you are gone. Book them back in with you before you leave. That way, they will have a schedule for their treatment and you will return to a full book.

**Sick leave intrigues me.**

I used to have sick days like everyone else. And then I opened up my own business and never had one. I came to realize sick days should be renamed “I’m sick and Tired” days. I completely understand the condition as I was once a victim to it. I have analysed the taking of sick days with my own staff and have come to the conclusion that it is directly proportionate to their sense of worth. The stronger they feel they are needed, the less days they work. I found this by talking, listening and observing them in their interactions with co workers and clients.

The take home message here is that sick days are often a sign of something else going wrong.

**Frustrated? Tired? Lacking confidence?**

Afraid of a client? Figure out what it is that is keeping you away from your book and tackle that head on. Your life won’t be any better for staying home watching Judge Judy, it will likely get worse through detachment.
Practitioner Related Issues

Too Many Courses and Conflicting Concepts

I am going to be blunt.

There is NO GOLDEN CURE. For anything!

Our bodies are complex and difficult vessels, and no one has had the same life, experiences the same stresses and presents in the same way. I have fixed tennis elbow with subscap releases, lumbar disc irritations with cervical mobs, hamstring tears with thoracic releases, shoulder impingements with glute releases, surgically diagnosed frozen shoulder with anterior cervical mobs and so on. In a majority of these cases they presented like any other shoulder impingement or tennis elbow. But what fixed them was far from conventional. The closest I have come to experiencing assessment nirvana for physiotherapists is by the way of Michael Ridgway who teaches people a method called the Ridgway Method. It basically demonstrates how to look outside the box at all injuries and presentations. Allows you full ownership of the clients body and focuses on what fixes them more so that what the problem is. It’s basis is a concept I had been using for years, and I was extremely happy to find there are more like me out there!

But on we go and physiotherapists across the country and world will attend a stupendous amount of extremely expensive courses. Remember that New Grad healing percentage I talked about??? The 70-80% rule. I think that we must see doing more courses as how to fix the remaining 20%, not to restructure the way we treat everything!

Sarah Keys and McKenzie recommend the exact opposite technique for certain lumbar conditions. They are both right and they are both wrong! They are right when it works and not when it doesn’t.
She had 40 degrees of movement in all directions. Subscap release. Nothing. Shoulder PROM, nothing. Then anterior cervical spine mobs on her affected side. Full range in that session. She cried, I cried. We all did high fives. It would be the last time I would ever give up on a client. I hunted from that day on. I something didn’t work, I would try something else. I developed techniques that I can’t describe, I released things that didn’t make sense, but I hunted.

It made work amazingly fresh, it made it exciting, it made it come alive. This was the new me and I loved it. I got sent the strangest patients from all over Sydney to see this guy who just gets results... it was fun.

I encourage all of my employees to look outside the box when treating and never ever get stuck in:

**PARALYSIS BY OVER ANALYSIS!**

Problem Solving and Hunting

This is a great follow on from this concept and it is where my career and methodology really took off. It just didn’t sit well with me that there was a guideline for an injury, you stick to that guideline and if it doesn’t heal, then get it operated on. Now, I am bloviating here a little, but you get my drift.

I started to hunt.

It all started when I came across a lady who had frozen shoulder, who I had given up on. Gave her the usual crappy exercises, gave her a hug and sent her on her way. She came back. She wanted me to treat her. So I did.

Half heartedly. What use was it I thought... then one day when I had thrown a bunch of needles into should, she had involuntary muscle spasms going all the way down her arm and up into her neck.

The needles got stuck, I panicked. She was ok with it, but it got me thinking. Although she was diagnosed under arthroscope, what if the frozen shoulder was there to protect her from something else?

So I hunted.

She had 40 degrees of movement in all directions.

Subscap release. Nothing.

Shoulder PROM, nothing.

Then anterior cervical spine mobs on her affected side. Full range in that session. She cried, I cried.

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So problem solve, but above all, hunt. Look in all the little nooks and crannies of your clients’ bodies because you never know where a solution will pop up from!
Problem solving process

And then we arrive at EBM and the “Book”.

I am not much of a fun to be brutally honest, but it does have its place in forming the simplest way that we can approach an issue to get somewhat of a result for a large mass of people. But we treat individuals, we don’t treat the masses.

Follow guidelines and rules if you have nothing else. But I encourage you to follow your gut, to hunt and hypothesize, look at everything and search everywhere. Most importantly you need to be safe.

If you start realizing where EBM and the book belongs (as a basis from which you launch your career) you will start seeing patients in a different light.

Client Relationships

The therapist-client relationship is so very important. It is critical that we be chameleons in every aspect of our working life.

We need to get along with all manner of personalities every day. Try not to offend! It doesn’t help anyone. Read a book called How to Win Friends and Influence People. Live it and your physio life will change.

Difficult clients become push overs, clients who are skeptics will turn around and clients who are hard to talk to will open up. It is only through really effective relationship building that you can get to fixing the elusive 20% of people.

By getting your clients to open up their minds, they may reveal things of significance to their condition. Whether it be an incident they did not remember, but in talking to them it came out or a life event that have impacted their body that they didn’t think was of concern.

In talking to them as people and caring for them, they will open up their hearts.

This is more important than you can ever know. When they open their hearts, they open a healing channel that you can tap into. They will become more optimistic, more positive, happier in general.

They then may do their exercises, they follow instruction, they stand and sit differently. It all matters. Their bodies become less tense and they accept healing into their lives.

We label it CBT, but I believe it is more than that. We cannot separate the psychological and the physical. We need to treat both at the same time in every client, not just the ones with so-called ‘yellow flags’.

Treat everyone as a yellow flag by getting to know them, using their name, caring for them, looking at them in their eye, dropping to their eye level and really listening. Repeat what they have said, show interest and they will respond.

Managing your Body

Physio isn’t nearly as hard on your body as we think it is. There are tougher professions out there. Plumping, concreting. We see them in our own clinics! By the small rate of workers comp claims that occur in our industry it would appear
that we are pretty good at looking after ourselves. But, I have a few important lessons that I have learned over the years.

One has been to take it easy on your return from extended breaks! The thumbs always tend to hurt a bit when we go on holidays and need some time to toughen up when you return.

Bed height is so very important too. Keeping that foot on the pedal to make sure it is always micro adjusted without compromise is critical.

Doing your rehab exercises with your clients is a great way to build rapport as well as look after yourself. Do the plank, perform those lunges, hold those squats. It all helps, even small amounts!

**Stupifying your Skills**

This will be brief. If you want to burn out follow these steps:

1- Assess and do a great assessment
2- Place them on a machine and see someone else
3- Come back into their room and give them exercises to do
4- Tell them to come back in a few days to do the same

I call it the stupification of the physio.

We are hunters, scientists, not a resource to give exercises and set the settings on machines. Don’t stupefy yourself!
Using your job as investment cash flow

Make sure you understand that you need to be putting money away. Commit to placing up to 20% of your post tax income into some sort of low risk long term investment strategy. This is the way as an employee you can get ahead in life.

By using your wages as investment capital, it will grow slowly at first, and then explode into a great capital sum in later years. Something different often happens with business owners.

They make more money, but reinvest it into their business. They grow with good cashflow in some cases, but then when they retire, often they have forgotten to invest their money in other investments that grow wealth and are left with only the value of their business.

Often there is no value in their business… So for business owners out there, don’t forget to invest your own 20%! It is really important.
Using this 20% as investment capital will also turn you into a mini business operator.

It will give you another outlet for learning, increase your general knowledge of the world and allow you flexibility of your job and lifestyle if you get ahead.

**Work to a long term plan**

Most importantly stick to a long term plan and goal set.

By writing down a list of goals that you really would like to achieve, you can then lay out stepping stones from which to follow. Break it into small achievable chunks, get a plan of attack to achieve each step, then move onto the next step.

Each month review your plan and see how you are progressing. You may need to tweak your strategy each month, but if you keep focused on that long term goal, the steps will happen in time.

Try making monthly, quartely, yearly and five yearly goals, as well as your retirement goal.

Talk to people about them, get excited about them. If you turn it into something that you can identify with, it is more likely that you will have to drive to make it happen!

It makes every day seem that much more important for fitting into the bigger picture and will get you out of bed when you really thought about taking a sickie. If you want help with getting goals and planning ahead, talk to someone in your business that can help.

I take no greater pleasure in my own business than talking to and watching my employees transform their lives into an investment and goal setting machine!
In Conclusion

Physio is rewarding in so many ways and is a much deeper profession than what even you may realize. It has power, and influence, creativity and art. It can make people cry, and laugh, it can change lives for the better and aid in the succeeding of personal goals.

We should be collectively pushing our profession to be as good as it can be.

We should be totally client focused. We should help one another achieve greatness and not see one another as the enemy.

We should stay in the profession, charge more, work less and impact people more greatly. Take ourselves more seriously, dress confidently and realize we are fantastic people that can form the glue in community health care.

Take care to you all, I hope to see you banding together as one!
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