

Viewpoints

The happiness and bitterness of a private dermatologist

TS Au 區德成

Many public dermatologists asked me if the life as a private dermatologist was happier. I answered them within a 95% confidence interval, "No job on earth is perfect."

Having worked in the public sector for more than fifteen years, I started my private practice three years ago. Since then, many doctors in the public sector have asked me, "Is life happier as a private dermatologist?" This question has also popped up when I was a dinner guest. I can say from first-hand experience, good food (especially when it is free) and good company will definitely make a private dermatologist happy.

No job on earth is perfect. If one is unhappy in the public sector and moves to the private sector, one may or may not be happy. A few weeks ago, I heard a private dermatologist complain, "When I have no patients, I feel bored; when I have many patients, I feel tired." So he was unhappy either way.

Without doing a proper opinion survey, I do not know if private dermatologists are, on average, happier than public dermatologists. Even if such a survey were to be conducted, the general

conclusion may not be applicable to you because of individual variation. You can only know for sure if you actually make the move. The trouble is that if you discover that private practice is not your cup of tea, you may not be able to return to your old job.

A major advantage of being a private dermatologist is freedom. Some dermatologists practice general dermatology while others focus on cosmetic procedures. You can do whatever you like though you naturally have to bear the consequences. Another advantage is that patients who come to see you usually like you. Those who do not like you would have gone to see another doctor. So the tension between doctor and patient is much milder than that in the public sector.

What is the down side of being a dermatologist in private practice? No one knows everything. When I worked for the Department of Health, my colleagues were there for me to consult should I encounter a puzzling case. In the private sector, you are on your own much of the time. It would be useful if you can build up a reliable network so that you can refer your patients for a second opinion when necessary.

Psychological adjustment is another challenge. Public doctors are used to having patients waiting

Private Practice, Hong Kong

TS Au, FRCP(Edin), FHKAM(Medicine)

Correspondence to: Dr. TS Au

Unit 502, Hing Wai Building, 36 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong

for them. When I started my private practice, I found myself waiting for patients most of the time. My defense mechanism convinced me that this was a long overdue vacation I deserved after working so hard for so many years. I read a lot of books in my office. A foot-loose friend of mine went to Japan four times in the first year of his private practice. He explained, "There were not many patients anyway. Why should I sit in my empty boring office waiting and waiting?"

Setting up a private clinic involves thousands of steps. One of my old colleagues advised me to

try to enjoy the process. But I found it impossible. I longed for a carefree life, but setting up a clinic meant a thousand worries – what equipment to order, who to employ as my clinic assistants, where to put the hand-soap dispenser,...? I lost three kilograms in setting up my clinic. But one man's sweet is another man's poison. Another dermatologist, who had been rather overweight, had lost ten kilograms in setting up his clinic and was immensely pleased!

Happiness and bitterness could be the two sides of the same coin. It all depends on your point of view.