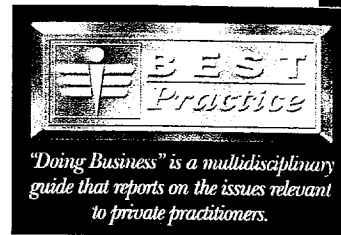


The Private Practitioner's Guide to Doing Business



Enduring Spirit

Mettler Center wins *ADVANCE's* 2003 Best PT Practice Award.

BY MARCI A. LANDSMANN

IF IT WERE AS EASY AS GRADUATING FROM PT school and hanging up a sign outside an office, you'd probably see as many private PT practices as you see golden arches on street corners.

But ask any private practice owner about his work, and words like reimbursement, HMOs, staffing and business plans will quickly remind you that opening up shop requires resolve and good business sense.

With this in mind, *ADVANCE* set out to honor the enduring spirit of the private practitioner. We enlisted three private practitioners to judge submissions based on four criteria: demonstrating excellence in customer service, practice growth, revenue growth and staff development.

It is our pleasure, therefore, to honor Mettler Center LLC in Champaign, Ill., with *ADVANCE's* 2003 Best PT Practice Award.

Overcoming Challenges

In the beginning, Mettler Center had its share of challenges—the greatest of which was attracting patients, says owner Paul R. Mettler, PT.

Being the only privately owned physical therapy center in an area ruled by HMOs, the Mettler Center had to struggle to make its way in tightly interwoven networks. In addition, orthopedic doctors were already part of the network and didn't refer to independent practices.

But that didn't stop Mettler, who used his experience in treating patients with temporomandibular joint dysfunction, to drum up referrals from orthodontists and dentists. He got involved with his local business chamber and rotary club, and

began offering community programs. Slowly, he chipped away at the great HMO wall. Living in a partial direct access state also helped in his fight.

Now, 13 years later, his determination has paid off. Mettler's practice has grown to include two satellite locations, two fitness centers, various rehabilitation and wellness services, and more than 70 staffers. Patient visits grow each year, increasing by more than 40.6 percent this year alone.

When he first opened his office, Mettler wanted to help others—a desire that

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designed his own manual therapy technique, which helps many of these patients live with less pain. His success with this technique helped spread the word. Slowly, more patients began to see him.

To this day, 75 percent of the Mettler Center's patient referrals come from word of mouth—an almost unheard of number in private practice. The HMO environment in Champaign/Urbana still is staunch, but Mettler has managed to diligently dig himself a stable foothold among the big networks.

Mission Centered

When discussing the direction of any private practice, Mettler stresses the importance of living up to your mission. He refers to part of his center's mission statement frequently in conversation: "to transform the lives of the people we serve." These nine words get to the core of caring for patients—in a field littered with sterile words, such as functional gains, productivity standards and patient outcomes.

Much of the center's success comes from a personalized approach. Therapy occurs in private treatment rooms with televisions and radios. Evening and weekend hours, and fast appointment turnaround times fit patients' busy lifestyles. >



PHOTO/COURTESY PAUL R. METTLER

Priding themselves on offering a number of subspecialties to meet patients' needs, Mettler's clinical staff members are (top row from left) Jeff Schroder, MPT; Kirsten Bollinger, PT; Steve Young, MPT; (bottom row) Karleen Havrilla, PT; Paul R. Mettler, PT; and Tonya Aczinowicz, MPT.

pushed him forward. He can recall staying up at night, thinking about manual therapy techniques that might relieve his patients' persistent pain and functional limitations.

Testing many of his theories, Mettler

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Individualized attention also means patients see the same therapist each visit. That therapist spends the whole session with the person, instead of juggling care and rushing among treatment tables. In two clinic sites, only licensed therapists provide treatment. (In the other clinic, which offers industrial medicine, the therapist sometimes uses aides.)

"We want to make sure our therapists have time with patients," says Mettler, explaining that the patient relationship is built on trust, confidence and competence. This only comes through one-on-one interaction, Mettler says.

The five therapists at Mettler Center are trained in orthopedic therapy, but have a variety of subspecialties. These include women's health, sports medicine, performing arts, ergonomics, wellness, spinal manipulation, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and fibromyalgia. The center also offers unique services, such as weight and disease management, hand therapy, massage therapy and nutritional classes.

Mettler believes training the staff is an investment that pays threefold. The center provides continuing education reimbursement and pays professional association fees for its staff. This investment in employees reaps a return. They remain committed to the practice and become integral to its growth, Mettler says.

Building Relationships

While expertise goes a long way in delivering quality service, Mettler clearly emphasizes the basis of any private practice: relationships.

In fact, Mettler's first hire was a previous patient who showed enthusiasm for his ideas. Years later, Mettler tapped into his own family to expand his staff. He hired his brother, who received his PhD in exercise science and wellness, to begin the center's fitness center.

Using their sports and clinical expertise, the duo approached the business from a fitness and rehabilitative perspective, which expanded his services.

"I've always known the importance of diversification," says Mettler, explaining that clinics need to remember the diversity of their clients. Now, therapists and fitness staff at the Mettler Center provide a holistic approach to patients. For example, patients may graduate from therapy and then sign up at the fitness center. By the same turn, people who join the fitness center may come back later

with injuries and require therapy.

Marketing has played a leading role in the Mettler Center's success. Because of the exclusive environment in the Champaign/Urbana area, Mettler puts special emphasis on getting the center's name out. The center uses many mediums, including cable, billboards and newspapers. The clinic has even paid for radio airtime to host a call-in show whereby callers phone in with health questions. Most recently, the center hired a public relations and marketing specialist to better hone their efforts.

A practice owner's job is feeling the pulse of his practice, and Mettler takes pride in figuring out when extra staff is needed. He's now planning to hire a finance person to take care of the accounting area of the practice.

When asked about lessons learned, Mettler pauses as if running through hundreds of lists in his mind. He can tell you ways he improved billing processes and the effectiveness of new marketing campaigns. He can even show you his manual therapy approach. But mostly, he stresses that private practitioners must have an insatiable hunger to see through their dreams.

"The most important trait is to be willing to take a risk when you have a burning desire to make a difference in the world," says Mettler. "The passion you have to change the world sustains you during difficult times." ■

Marci A. Landsmann is senior associate editor.

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