

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Achieving Goals 'I Never Dreamed Of'

One of Dr. Mark Podwal's first memories of his interest in art dates back to early childhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., when a drawing he sketched of a train caught the attention of his kindergarten teacher. Before that, he said, it seemed as if his teacher hadn't even noticed his name on the roster.

By the time he was a third-year medical student at New York University, the focus of his art had shifted from trains to far more serious subjects. It was 1968, and he sketched a collection of politi-

cally themed black-line drawings to protest the Vietnam War, including works on the killings of student protestors at Kent State University in Ohio and the bombing of Laos.

Martin Begun, associate dean of the medical school at the time, was so impressed by Dr. Podwal's surrealistic gouache paintings that he provided a space for him at Alumni Hall, the entrance to the medical school, to stage his first solo exhibition.

That event caught the eye of famed urologist Adrian Zorngiotti, who introduced Dr. Podwal to David Levine, the renowned political and literary caricaturist who drew for the New Yorker, New York Magazine, and the New York Review of Books.

"David was very encouraging," recalled Dr. Podwal, a dermatologist who practices in New York City. Years later, he would be represented by Forum Gallery, which also represents Levine.

From that point on, Dr. Podwal's avocation as an artist began to skyrocket. He drew politically themed works for the op-ed pages of the New York Times and also created scores of Jewish-themed drawings and gouaches.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art reproduced his art on 14 objects, including a Passover plate, jewelry, note cards, and prints. The Metropolitan Opera



Irritating a congressman was a great achievement, said Dr. Mark Podwal.

also commissioned him to create a series of Mozart portraits to sell as greeting cards.

He's made his mark in other media as well, serving as executive producer and writer for the documentary "House of Life: The Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague," narrated by Claire Bloom and broadcast nationwide on public television in the spring of 2009.

Dr. Podwal also did illustrations for a book by Harold Bloom and four chil-

dren's books by Francine Prose.

One of his most recent books, "Doctored Drawings" (Bellevue Literary Press, 2007), is a retrospective of his line drawings, mainly from works on medical subjects that appeared in the New York Times. One image from 1994, called "Mediscare," portrays Congress as an octopus wielding a surgical instrument in each arm. "It's perfect for what Congress is doing to health care reform now," Dr. Podwal said.

Another image from the book pokes fun at the circus of complexity surrounding the then-Clinton health plan. After the drawing first appeared in the New York Times, someone who worked in Dr. Podwal's office told him she had fielded a phone call at home from Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), whom she knew and "who was extremely upset with the drawing," Dr. Podwal said. "If I can make a congressman upset by the drawing, I've achieved what I was trying to do."

Dr. Podwal said that he is especially proud of the work he did on the "House of Life" film project. "I'm not religious, but I'm very emotionally attached to Judaism," he said—so much so that every year, he and his family fly to Prague to mark Rosh Hashanah in the city's 700-year-old Old-New Synagogue.

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"Matzoh Moon" used acrylic, gouache, and colored pencil on paper (2004).

©2008 DR. MARK PODWAL, COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

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THE OFFICE

Tips to Save Your Practice Money Now

Physician office overhead costs are up; reimbursements and collections are down. But don't despair.

There are ways to save money and tilt your balance sheet in the direction of a healthy bottom line. Here are some cost-saving tips:

► **Maximize tax-free benefits for you and your partner(s).** Don't forget to deduct payments for malpractice, major medical, disability, life, and liability insurance. Personal expense account charges are deductible as well, including the cost of attending CME meetings; dues and subscriptions; and as much as \$45,000 a year for retirement spending.

► **Stretch your office services by hiring midlevel providers.** Salaries for nurse practitioners and physician assistants can quickly reach the "break even" point and can begin to increase the profits of the practice once these practitioners perform 10-13 visits a day.

► **Reevaluate your ratio of front office to clinical personnel.** A good ratio is 1 physician to 3.5 clinical staff. Better is 1:3.4 if your office has a lab and 1:3.2 if your office has no lab. A ratio that's too low is 1:2.8 or 1:2.3.

► **Charge patients for simple but time-consuming tasks.** Consider charging a fee for filling out forms for camp, for one.

► **Save on purchasing supplies.** Become part of a physician buying group (PBG) for office supplies, medical supplies, and lab supplies, and especially vaccines. Such groups have the potential for saving a practice 10%-25% on "big ticket" items, and thousands of dollars a year on vaccines.

Three PBGs are the National Discount Vaccine Alliance (785-273-4165; <http://nationaldiscountvaccinealliance.com>); Atlantic Health Partners (800-741-2044; www.atlantichealthpartners.com); and Physicians' Alliance (866-348-9780; <http://www.physall.com>).

► **Renegotiate your rent.** Commercial real estate? They're hurting right now. Any physician or group whose lease is expiring within 2 years should renegotiate now. Some landlords are offering 3-6 months of free rent in exchange for a renewal of an office space lease. Another option, especially in light of the current, dismal commercial real estate market, is to consider buying your own building while prices are low.

► **Stretch the use of your office space.**

Could you accommodate another provider and expand your business hours from early morning to late evening, with physicians staggering their hours? Could you sublease space during off-hours to a lactation consultant; a physical, occupational, or speech therapist; or a registered dietitian who could provide nutrition counseling and diabetes education?

► **Target missed appointments.** Automated dialing systems can make reminder calls and reduce expensive no-shows if this is a problem in your practice.

► **Consider participating in clinical trials.** It's a lot of work, but adding research to a medical practice can be rewarding and intellectually invigorating,

as well as profitable, infusing up to \$100,000 a year into a practice's bottom line. The concept works only as long as a dedicated physician wants to take on the role of principal investigator and at least one office staff member can devote the bulk of his or her time to coordinating the trial(s). ■

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BY NORMAN HARBAUGH, M.D.

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