

# BREAKING AWAY

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**Entrepreneurship may be the way to go  
when passions lie outside patient care**

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**By Barbara Alden Wilson**

**W**hen Kenneth Cooper, MD, MPH, left a successful 13-year career as an Air Force physician in San Antonio, Texas, 26 years ago to start his own business, the odds seemed to be against him.

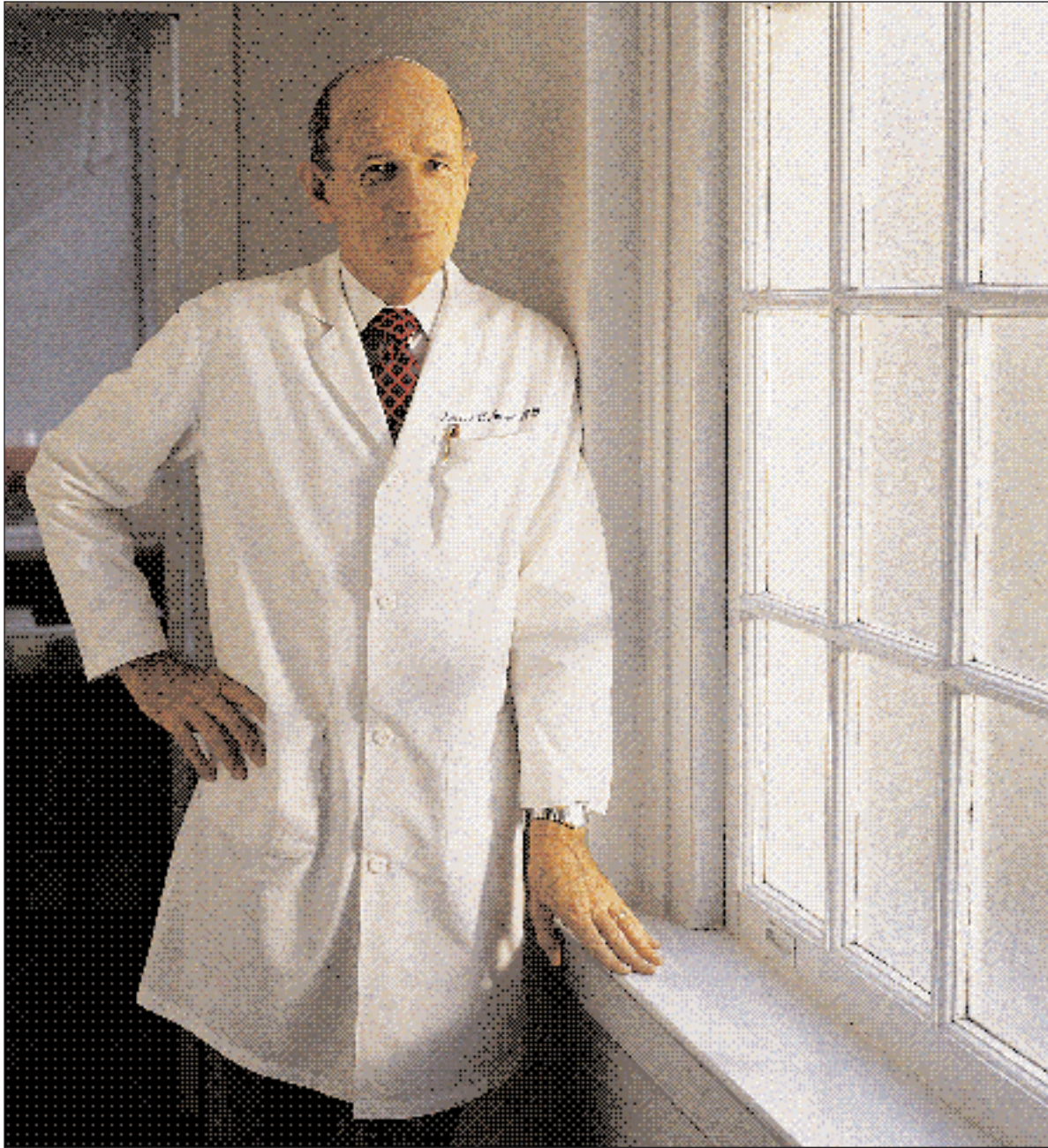
“I came to Dallas with great ideas and hopes of establishing a center dedicated to taking care of the health of healthy people,” he says. “My supportive colleagues — and there weren’t many back in those days— said, ‘There’s no way you can limit

your practice to taking care of healthy people. People visit physicians when they’re sick, not when they’re well.” For the first couple of years, I thought they were right. But we’ve grown from a two-room office and two employees to a 30-acre estate with 350 employees.”

Cooper is founder and chairman of The Cooper Aerobics Center, the world-renowned health and fitness complex composed of the Cooper Clinic, Cooper Fitness Center, Cooper

Wellness Program, Guest Lodge at The Cooper Aerobics Center (a full-service, European-style hotel), and The Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research. Now one of the most recognized physician entrepreneurs in the country, Cooper was ahead of his time. Not only were his views on fitness and health deemed dubious by many, but his decision to leave a traditional medical career to pursue a dream was virtually unheard of.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Kenneth Cooper, MD left traditional medicine 26 years ago and founded The Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas. A group of Dallas businessmen supported his concept of teaching wellness. "Over the years, when major business decisions have had to be made, I've consulted my friends... That support has been invaluable..."

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Today, however, as the health-care landscape changes, more and more physicians and medical students are considering work outside of treating patients. According to the American Medical Association, one search firm that specializes in placing physicians in the pharmaceutical and biotechnical industries reports that it receives more than 300 inquiries a month from physicians seeking to leave patient care. And although experts are not sure exactly how many physicians in a given year venture off to start a business outside of medicine, the choice to go solo in the business world seems to be growing more common.

"Anecdotally, the number of physicians who have come to us with an interest in becoming entrepreneurs has been increasing over the last three years," says John-Henry Pfifferling, PhD, the director of the Center for Professional Well-Being in Durham, North Carolina.

### Following your passion

Whether you're an established physician who has become disenchanted with the confines of managed care or a resident wondering if patient care is really what you want to do for your entire career, entrepreneurship could be a viable option. Auburn, Washington, pediatrician Todd Pearson, MD, found himself yearning for a new career path after 20 years in medicine. A thorough self-examination helped him decide to leave a group practice last July and open the Center for Physician Renewal.

"I am a little bit different than many docs in that I kind of fell into medicine by default," Pearson says. "It wasn't a passion or a calling from an early age. And I questioned

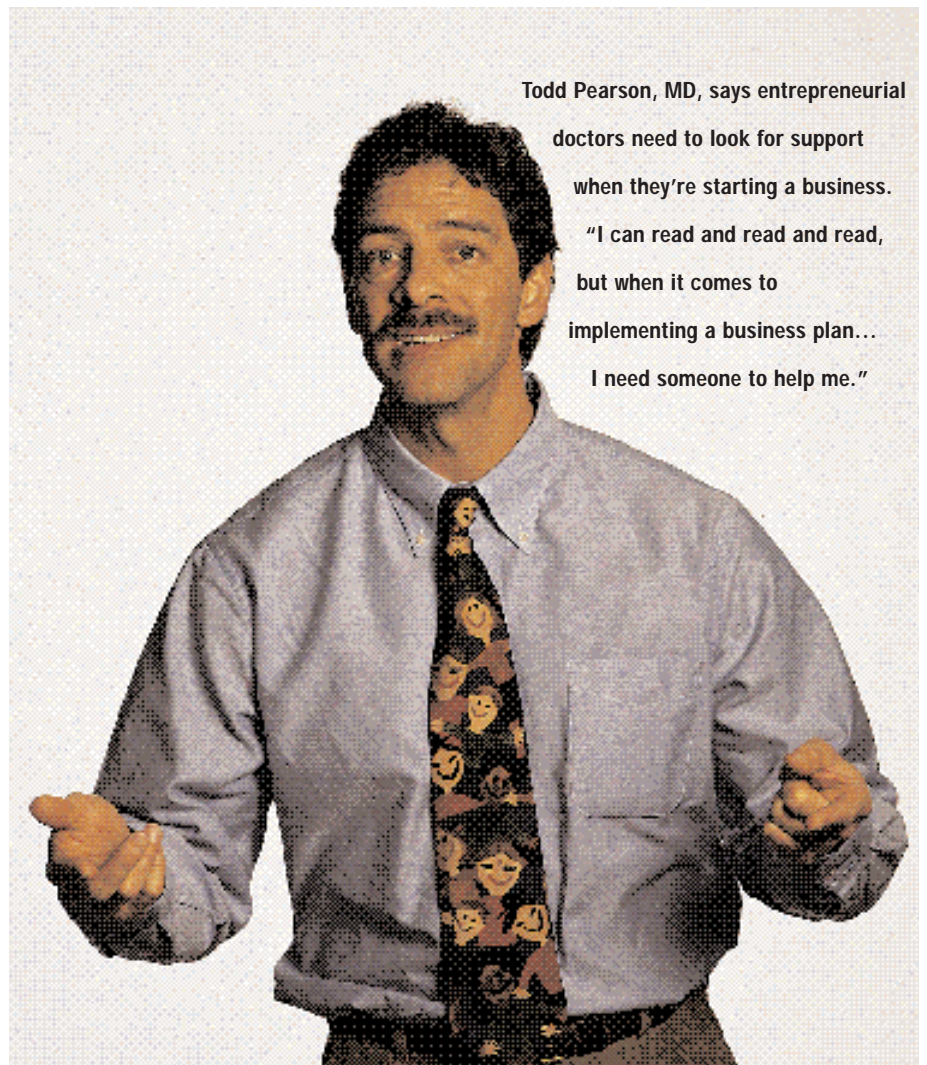
my career fit since my first day of medical school."

By 1994, Pearson arranged to take a sabbatical from his group practice. "Among other things, I was tired of being reactive, externalizing and being victimized. I was tired of the blaming and whining. I felt like I was becoming a pollutant in an already caustic environment, and I just didn't want to be stuck in that environment anymore."

Pearson used his sabbatical to figure out what he wanted for "the next chapter" of his life. He searched the Puget Sound area of Washington for resources for physicians considering a shift in careers.

"I was very disappointed," he says. "There was very little help geared to physicians, whether they were looking for a better fit within medicine, for alternatives in clinical or nonclinical medicine, or even for a way to leave medicine or patient care altogether."

Pearson broadened his search to national resources. "It became an all-consuming passion, much like the way for many of us medicine is or was a calling," he says. "It became very much a spiritual endeavor, because I was so aware that what I was going through is something that is occurring with increasing frequency [among physicians]."



Todd Pearson, MD, says entrepreneurial doctors need to look for support

when they're starting a business.

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Pearson decided his passion for career transition issues could be parlayed into his current business. According to Pfifferling, having a passion for a certain line of work is



John-Henry Pfifferling, PhD

a cornerstone of entrepreneurial success. "The key points are, what is your area of love and passion? And what ideas are associated with your areas of love and passion?" he says. "Love

and passion give you the staying power. If there's no love and passion and inspiration from the ideas, the concept, the product and the domain, then you won't have the precipitant to learn from your mistakes. And those who can't learn from their mistakes, predictably, will fail."

Of course, Pfifferling points out, all the passion you can muster for a new venture won't mean much if you don't educate yourself about the business world. "I have to make my clients aware of the core and minimal knowledge areas of business," he says. "Before they start their own businesses, physicians must have the knowledge of someone who has an undergraduate degree in business, at least."

Physician, educate thyself

Before a prospective physician entrepreneur runs out to enroll in business classes or an MBA program, Pfifferling recommends doing some reading. The best place to start, he says, is with the business titles on the New York Times best-seller list. If the titles of those books don't sound the least bit interesting, perhaps starting one's own

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business is not the way to go, Pfifferling points out. But if the titles sound appealing, he recommends choosing two to read.

"As you're reading them, make little notes or stars in the margin on topics that particularly catch your attention," Pfifferling says. "When you finish the book, go back and look at the notations. Now do more homework in that area."

After a thorough self-education on business topics, it's time to seek more formal instruction. Any uni-

versity, college, or community college offers business classes, Pfifferling says. Some universities offer evening MBA programs geared specifically for those who have been out of school and in the working world for several years. Private instruction is also available from Krypton, a business development and training center in Annapolis, Maryland. The company — started by Jack Kushner, MD, about 18 months ago — offers a condensed MBA program and an entrepre-

### Resource Rx

The following is a list of professional resources and what they offer to physicians considering an entrepreneurial career

■ **The Center for Physician Development**

1 Memorial Drive  
15th Floor  
Cambridge, MA 02142  
(617) 252-0241

\*Provides: career counseling, professional development, stress management

■ **The Center for Physician Renewal**

37922 55th Ave. S.  
Auburn, WA 98001  
(206) 351-8577

\*Provides: tools for self-evaluation, career fit analysis, career transition guidance

■ **The Center for Professional Well-Being**

21 West Colony Place

Suite 150  
Durham, NC 27705  
919-489-9167

\*Provides: physician well-being and quality-of-life intervention, career counseling and coaching, plan to offer seminars on copyrights and patents

■ **Krypton International**

20 Ridgely Ave.  
Suite 302  
Annapolis, MD 21401  
800-464-1760

\*Provides: condensed MBA program, one-on-one business counseling, ongoing business consultation, financial planning for entrepreneurial start-up

■ **Leaving the Bedside:**

*The Search for a Nonclinical Medical Career*

A \$39.90 book from the American Medical Association

Credit card orders:  
800-621-8335 (product number: OP 392096)

\*Provides: overview of non-clinical career options, self-analysis worksheets, professional association listings, brief coverage of entrepreneurial issues

■ **The Center for Personal and Professional Renewal**

Los Gatos, California

■ **The Menninger Leadership Center**

Topeka, Kansas

neurship business course.

“We teach, among other things, how to get the money to start up your business, how to write a business plan, and how to decide on a good franchise, if you want to go that route,” Kushner says.

Pearson advocates checking into advisory resources at nearby colleges and universities. The University of Washington, in Seattle, for example, has a Business Diagnostic Center, where MBA students act as consultants for growing or emerging businesses. The service is free and the student consultants earn MBA class credit through it. Similar programs are available throughout the country.

Pfifferling says he is an advocate of including business training over the course of residencies. “In some residency programs, particularly family practice, there is training in running the medical practice — business skills and practice management skills,” he says. “What I’m asking is, within that subset of practice management, have a mentoring block. It’s usually impossible for a resident to go take a regular class during residency. So I’d like for residents to be matched with physicians who’ve actually been in the business world. Most of the physicians who’ve had their success or failure are wanting to share that with a resident — someone they’re not competing with. Another way to achieve hands-on knowledge is to find a businessperson who’s willing to take you under his or her mantle.”

Taking the plunge

Despite being armed with the passion for an idea and the basic business knowledge to turn it into a viable enterprise, many physicians find

the prospect of making the leap from medical practice to entrepreneurship daunting.

“Many physicians are averse to risk-taking,” says Kushner, who is also author of the book *Preparing to Tack: When Physicians Change Careers* (Vantage Press, 1996). “But they must realize there are risks to staying in medicine: hospital and practice downsizing, a loss of autonomy under managed care, poor compensation through health-care financing. Many docs just sit in their waiting rooms after hours, wringing their hands until retirement. I decided I wanted to do something.” In addition to Krypton, Kushner runs a company called Futuristic Instruments, which produces computerized surgical simulators to teach surgeons how to operate.

According to Pearson, fear can be the root of procrastination. “As physicians, we tend to have the mentality that we can do it all,” he says, “and we’re not very good about looking for support. Many of us don’t have a good entrepreneurial business background at all, yet we’re compulsive and we’re perfectionistic, and it’s very easy to be totally overwhelmed. You say, well, I need to do this, this, this and this, and we make this huge list of things that need to be done in terms of business planning. But the flip side to perfectionism is procrastination. I know that’s a huge issue for me.”

Does it take two?

Finding a partner or adviser with a strong business background is one option for physicians who feel underqualified in areas such as budgeting and marketing. “I can read and read and read, but when it comes to implementing a business plan and

doing the marketing right, I need someone to help me,” Pearson says.

Physicians must approach a potential partnership or advisory relationship with caution, Kushner says. “You may end up not seeing eye to eye,” he warns. “I had a partner for my first business venture, Transcriptions International (an on-line medical transcription business), and we had a falling out. I kept the business going afterward, but our parting wasn’t pleasant.”

Such debacles can be avoided with extensive discussions with and reference checks on potential cohorts, Pfifferling says. “Each of you needs to know what your strengths are, what the other person’s strengths are, how they complement each other, and how you could share the eventual production of a small, medium, or large business,” he says. “It’s a good idea to start small, with someone who is a complement to you, who thanks you and appreciates your special skills, who confronts you when you’re out of your domain. And you in turn can learn from them.”

Pfifferling, however, did not hire a business adviser until he was 10 years into overseeing the Center for Professional Well-Being. Before that, he recalls, “I ran with the power of my cause — to provide an educational organization devoted to helping physicians balance their personal and professional lives and reduce the prevalence of burnout. That was predicated on my research in studying stress among residents. So I just assumed, blindly, that the world would beat a path to our door. That, of course, was completely wrong.”

After hundreds of unsuccessful attempts to obtain funding via grants and private backers, Pfifferling hired as his financial adviser a long-time friend — a business professor and

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long-range planning adviser from whom his wife took a class to earn her MBA. Sometimes, business advice can come from more informal sources. Cooper, for example, happens to have friends in the business world who are more than happy to offer free advice.

“From the early days, they’ve helped me, and I wouldn’t be here today if it hadn’t been for their support,” Cooper says. “Joe McKinney, Fred Meyer, and C.A. Rondell — all at the top of their class at Harvard School of Business — got together and started the Tyler Corporation here in Dallas. Joe heard me speak when my first book (*Aerobics*) came out in 1968, and he was so enthralled with the concept I was promoting that he wanted me to come to Dallas. That’s one reason I came up here from San Antonio, because he offered to support me financially.

Over the years, when major business decisions have had to be made, I’ve consulted my friends at Tyler. That support has been invaluable from an entrepreneurial standpoint.”

And don’t overlook the value of a spouse or loved one with a head for business, Pfifferling notes.

“My wife has her MBA and runs a very successful business,” he says. “The typical person who marries a businessperson is more apt than not to be a non-businessperson — more artistic or academic or more into a mission or a cause. I come from a cause perspective. So our deficits are usually the strengths of our partners in a spousal or personal relationship. As long as we accept that, we’ve got a free teacher.”

Sources of support

Although a spouse or significant other can be a tremendous source of

support for an entrepreneur, that person cannot be one’s sole emotional or professional support, Pearson cautions.

“It’s great if your family is integrally involved in your venture, and it’s great if your family is a primary source of support,” he says, “but it’s also very important that you don’t rely on your spouse or your family as your sole support. They’ve got their own issues to deal with, and you need to have external supports.

There are others who are in transition and can identify with what you’re doing. You could turn to a career coach, a career counselor, work groups — but it’s very important that you look for supports outside of the family, that you don’t rely on, say, just a spouse. That’s a tough one for physicians, because most often, if you ask them who their best friend is, they’ll say their spouse. As a rule, a lot of them have not been very good at cultivating a lot of strong outside relationships.”

Reaching out for a good support system may seem awkward at first, but contacts can go a long way if a business begins to stray from its course. Going out on your own doesn’t mean going it alone. It just means doing it on your own terms. For many entrepreneurs, that’s the true reward in any venture. ■

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