



By Barbara Alden Wilson

RELIGHTING YOUR PROFESSIONAL SPARK

How to focus your passion and fuel your career.

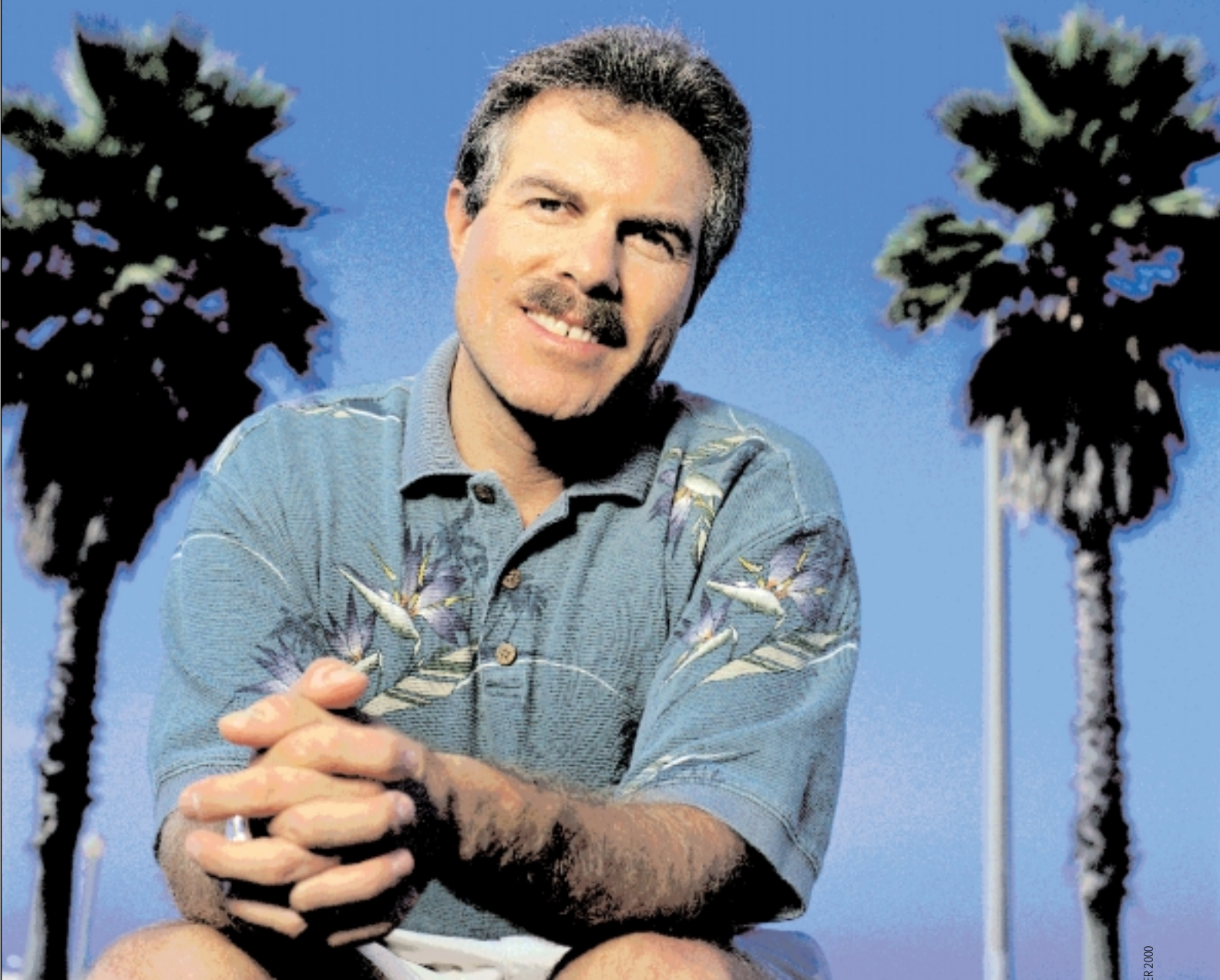
CAREER COACH LARRY STYBEL, PHD, PRESIDENT of the international consulting firm Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, in Boston, recalls working with an internist who hated his job: the mundane cases, the managed-care paperwork, the hours on call. It appeared to the doctor that nothing about his work would change if he stayed in group practice, no matter where or with whom. Then he learned that doctors were in demand to be medical directors with insurance companies.

“The guy was practically jumping up and down, he was so excited,” Stybel says. “He had no idea such positions even existed. It sounded great to him, and he found a medical direc-

tor job. It gave him the career spark that had been completely lacking before.”

It’s not unusual, Stybel adds, for physicians to spend a few years—or even decades—in private practice and then start asking themselves, “Is this all there is?”

Ruth J. Luban, a Santa Monica, California-based counselor and consultant on career burnout and mid-life transition, says most physicians today go into medicine expecting a certain amount of mundane work, such as the unavoidable paperwork that goes hand in hand with managed care. But knowing about the downside of practicing medicine and actually experiencing it are two different things.



"Most physicians tend to be 'on fire' when they begin their careers," she says. "They are driven, charismatic people. They may think they can handle managed care's paperwork and red tape. They may expect that the set hours and minimal call as an HMO employee will be great. But the reality is that day-to-day, it can become pretty frustrating. It doesn't fit the doctor's personality."

How bad is it, really?

So your job has lost its appeal. But how do you know whether you're just in a slump or it's really time to consider moving on, either to a different position or a

Ken Waltzer, MD, MPH, first discovered a need to shift gears when he was assigned to staff an emergency room. **"I didn't see myself as a fix-it kind of guy," Waltzer recalls, "so I disliked the emergency room. I like to learn about people and follow through with them. You don't do that in the emergency room."**

whole new career? Among the first few steps toward improving your situation, according to Stybel, are to stay positive, stop complaining and realize that your career is a cycle.

"I tell my physician clients, 'You are NOT the only professionals in the world in upheaval,'" he says. "Everyone else is pressed for time. Everyone else is squeezed nearly dry of profes-

sional resources."

So if your life situation—a mortgage, a family, or care of aging parents, for example—demands a steady paycheck and a fairly predictable schedule, hang in there, he advises.

"There are times that the Venetian blinds of opportunity are open, and times when they are closed," Stybel says. "But blinds that are closed will

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After a particularly long, difficult day in orthopedic surgery residency, Prakash Patel, MD called a friend on the West Coast and talked about a high-tech venture capital opportunity into the wee hours of the morning. **“I hung up and thought, ‘Hey, if I have so much energy and passion about this opportunity, maybe I should pursue this on a full-time basis.’”**

open in time. Things will change.”

He offers as an example a 69-year-old client who, now that his seven children are grown and independent, is selling his practice and training to be a Web master on the Internet.

“The time is right for him,” Stybel says. “His obligations a few years ago would not have allowed him to do it then.”

If your circumstances dictate staying where you are for awhile, Stybel and Luban recommend the following strategies to rekindle your fire:

- Use continuing education classes to

explore other areas. “You may be wondering whether you would do well as an entrepreneur,” Stybel says. “Instead of signing up for a business school class, take a continuing ed course in starting your own business, such as something offered at the local community college, to see if that might be for you. If it strikes a chord, THEN start considering an MBA.”

- Join the board of an organization that interests you, whether professional or recreational in nature. “This will give you something you enjoy focusing on,

and may lead to networking for a new career in the future,” he points out.

- Use an extended vacation to try something new. “Plenty of companies welcome unpaid ‘interns’ to spend a few weeks helping out and learning the ropes,” says Stybel. “Even if you end up not liking the field you’ve volunteered in, it won’t be time wasted, because you will have learned what you DON’T want to do.”

- Look for small changes you can make, such as taking half-days off on a regular

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NO CHICKENING OUT

Besides bolstering your education and savvy about the field you plan to enter, you'll need to start shoring yourself up emotionally before you make the jump. Here are some common stumbling blocks to making a change, and what those who have been there have to say about them:

- All of my training is in medicine. I'm likely to fail at something different. "Keep an open mind," says Ken Waltzer MD, MPH, the chief medical officer for ConvergenceHealth. "Medical training tends to narrow your view of what you can do. But if you think about it, this fear is rather silly. You're obviously a smart person for having gotten as far as you have. Of course you could do it."
- I can't throw away everything I invested in medical school—the money, 10 years of my life... "You're hardly throwing it away," says Waltzer. "My total life and professional experience is essential to what I'm doing now. Your ability to learn and make decisions in general has come from your medical training."
- I hate to say it, but I'm used to my word being the final decision. I'm used to people carrying out my orders. "This can be particularly hard to give up," concedes Ruth Luban, a counselor, author and lecturer on career burnout and transition. "But you CAN change. Getting a career coach or attending seminars can help a lot if you have a fear of moving out of your box of authority."
- I'm not sure I can do as well financially at another venture. "There are tremendous financial opportunities outside of health care, but that's not the key issue," says Prakash Patel, MD, the vice president of acquisitions for The Internet Healthcare Group. "It's doing what you most enjoy. Do what you are energized by." As for entrepreneurship, Waltzer adds, "I figured even if ConvergenceHealth turned out to be a financial failure, it would nevertheless lay the groundwork for my next venture." ■

basis, even once a week, Luban suggests.

- **Delegate. Don't assume responsibilities around the office that could be handled by someone else. Ask yourself, "Who can solve this problem besides me?"**
- **During the day, alternate work with periods of rest. "Even five minutes, with your eyes closed and your feet up on your desk, can make a difference," says Luban. "Taking even just four to five deep breaths while you do this allows you to get out of the stress mode."**
- **Avoid self-prescribed, unhealthy "medications" to deal with stress. These include everything from overeating, to using alcohol to relax, to overspending. "I have heard repeatedly from physicians that they spend more when they are working hard," Luban notes. "They are trying to buy relaxation, or their families are trying to buy happiness because they rarely see the physician family member. But quality down-time doesn't cost anything."**

To leave or not to leave

When the time comes that you actually could make a move, Luban, the author of *Are You a Corporate Refugee? A Survival Guide for Downsized, Disillusioned and Displaced Workers* (Penguin-Putnam, available November 2000), recommends doing some soul-searching before leaving your position. She advises taking enough "alone time" to wander in a natural environment or to write in a journal. Use this time to "revisit and reclaim" what got you into medicine in the first place. "Was it because your dad was a doctor? Because it was scientifically challenging? Because you wanted to help people?" she asks.

"How can you incorporate these reasons into your current situation? If there is no way to do that, can you spin your original passion in a different direction, and reclaim it?"

Ken Waltzer, MD, MPH, the chief medical officer for ConvergenceHealth, a company that provides businesses with Internet-based health guidance for employees and patients, found himself in need of redirection early in his medical career. One of his first assignments in internal medicine was as an emergency room physician at The Cambridge Hospital of Harvard Medical School, which he quickly realized was not a good fit.

"I didn't see myself as a fix-it kind of guy," Waltzer recalls, "so I disliked the emergency room. I like to learn about people and follow through with them. You don't do that in the emergency room."

Traditional practice in internal medicine was lacking something as well. "I've always been the type of person who wanted to make a difference, but in traditional practice I felt I was really reaching only a few people."

The next stop was to use his degree in public health, when Waltzer became the first preventive care coordinator for Southern California Kaiser-Permanente. While at Kaiser, he also headed medical education at the West Los Angeles Medical Center and cared for an internal medicine practice with nearly 2000 patients.

"At that point, I thought, 'NOW I'm affecting more people,'" he recalls.

But his seven-year stint with Kaiser eventually grew stale, leading him to follow another passion—entrepreneurship—to his present position with ConvergenceHealth.

As Waltzer's experience shows, the decision to try something new may evolve from a passion that has been brewing for years—it just takes a pivotal moment to take the plunge.

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Such was also the case for Prakash Patel, MD, who decided to combine his passion for medicine with a long-held interest in technology and an aptitude for business after what he describes as a career “epiphany.” After a particularly long, difficult day in orthopedic surgery residency at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center five years ago, Patel logically should have collapsed at the end of his shift. Instead, he called a friend on the West Coast and talked about a high-tech venture capital opportunity into the wee hours of the morning.

Patel, who had been doing health care and high-tech consulting since college, felt the time was right to make a big career jump. “I hung up and thought, ‘Hey, if I have so much energy and passion about this opportunity, maybe I should pursue this on a full-time basis.’”

Patel soon obtained a leave of absence from his residency to immerse himself in building high-tech health-care companies with a Connecticut firm. He has since parlayed that experience into his present position as vice president of acquisitions for The Internet Healthcare Group.

“I very much enjoyed medicine,” says Patel, who ranked among the top eight students in his class at Cornell University Medical College. “I also had some experience in the high-tech environment and in business for years. My passion was to put my business interest together with high tech and health care. I followed my passion.”

Luban says this is the key to making the jump from traditional medicine to another career. “You can’t simply be running from a bad situation, or trying something new just to make more money,” she says. “To be successful, your decision must come from your passionate core. Ideally, you must have a passion for what you plan to pursue.”

What’s your passion?

Although some people have a burning

Living happily ever after

Whether you end up following your passion into a new field or redirecting your current career into something you can be passionate about, maintaining your new spark will take conscious effort. Luban, the creator of the audio tape guide, *Keeping the Fire: From Burnout to Balance*, (self-published, order via e-mail: ruthilu@home.com), recommends the following:

- **Don’t tie your entire identity to the title “doctor.” If you maintain your medical practice, try letting your patients call you by your first name.**
- **Go on a vacation tour or trek, but don’t**

desire to follow a particular career from the time they are children, many go into a career field without much passion for it—or anything else, for that matter. It’s not uncommon, according to Stybel, to become so enmeshed in medicine that a physician has no idea what he or she is truly passionate about.

Stybel’s company provides doctors in flux with the opportunity to complete an extensive biography. Available for downloading from the Web site www.boardoptions.com, the biography guidelines take about eight hours to complete. Included in one question, for example: “Identify seven significant accomplishments in your life. These accomplishments could be work or non-work related... They should be the things... which have given you the greatest personal satisfaction.”

“The biography helps people do a self-assessment,” Stybel says. “We then recommend that you have a friend or acquaintance whose opinion you respect go over the biography with you. You will

tell the others in the group you’re a doctor.

- **Maintain boundaries between work and home, especially if you have left medicine and are no longer on call during off hours.**
- **Find an outlet for your creativity. Paint. Write. Become a beginner at a musical instrument. Do something creative that you truly enjoy, even if you’re not great at it.**
- **Get enough sleep. “This may sound silly, but it is very important,” says Luban. “Sleep deprivation can quickly lead to burnout. Doctors are notorious for lecturing patients on getting enough sleep to keep themselves healthy and less stressed, but the doctors often act as though they don’t need any sleep.”**

likely find a common thread of sources of enjoyment throughout your life. If they relate to medicine, you may want to stay the course. If not, you’ll see where you’d do well to go.”

Stybel also recommends perusing job banks on the Web, such as www.careerpath.com and www.monster.com. “Copy all the jobs that interest you. Then find out as much as you can about them—the education and experience required.”

Even personality testing, such as the STRONG Interest Inventory, can help physicians who feel as though they are foundering, Stybel says. These questionnaires tell participants what line of work might suit them, according what type of worker they have the most in common with based on their answers. Luban cautions, however, that such testing may not be geared toward the level of education a physician has already achieved.

“Obviously, if a doctor tests to have the most in common with a janitor, that doesn’t mean he or she should chuck it

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all and go off to clean office buildings,” she says.

Do your homework

Leaving a medical career for another field will take preparation. Before heading off in search of a “dot com” opportunity or designing the stationery for your new entrepreneurial venture, you will need to know your prospective line of work inside out, according to those who have made the jump.

“If you’re serious about a new career option, you’ll need to find out everything you can about it,” says Patel. “You have to be very thorough. Approach it like a research paper. Match your skills with the right employer. At the very least, you are going to have to learn a whole language for the business world.”

Stybel agrees, pointing out that formal business education (e.g., an MBA) can be an excellent asset, whether you are starting your own company or planning to move up another corporate ladder. Set up informational interviews with managers of companies you’d like to work for, or companies you’d like to emulate in starting your own business, Stybel advises. Keep in mind, he says, that your geographical location may play a part in what you ultimately will be able to do.

“In a large city, it’s generally easier to develop a different identity,” Stybel points out. “In a small town, it tends to be harder to make real career changes.”

Then think about the framework required to get yourself off to a good start. If you’re joining an established company, make yourself known as soon as possible to all of the key “players” in the organization. Ask a lot of questions, and listen. If you’re starting your own company, identify your weaknesses and hire or retain on contract someone who can make up for them. Although ConvergenceHealth is doing well, Waltzer says that if he had it to do

again, before leaving Kaiser he would have “more ducks in a row” beyond writing his thorough business plan.

“I’d have the core team for the business assembled as well,” he says. “As it was, it took me six months to set up the team after I started the business. And I would get someone truly skilled in the business world on that team. I did not have the real-world experience to get the business going.”

Keep your poker face

While readying yourself for a change somewhere down the road, it’s best not to let on to colleagues, patients and even friends that a career change is afoot, Stybel notes.

“I once had a physician tell me, ‘I know how to drive my practice to zero: Tell my partners I’m ambivalent about what I’m doing.’”

Indeed, no physician partner would be interested working alongside a physician whose heart was not in his or her work. Likewise, patients would be none too thrilled to hear that their doctor was looking to move on—especially when that means getting out of medical practice entirely. So it’s best to say nothing, if possible, thereby eliminating the possibility of becoming the object of grapevine gossip and speculation. If you must bounce your ideas off someone, be sure it is a person you can genuinely trust.

“I told only one person that I was seriously planning to leave Kaiser,” says Waltzer. “He was a member of the board there—someone I trusted—and I wanted to find out how much notice I could give of my resignation without burning a bridge there.”

Waltzer learned he could reasonably give 30 days notice rather than the traditional 90, although that would mean forfeiting one-quarter of his profit-sharing—in this particular year, an atypically small

amount of money. In spite of being driven by a passion to start a business venture that would reach the masses, he still managed to maintain his professional composure. Waltzer finished the development phase of an innovative smoking cessation program to be implemented as part of Kaiser-Permanente’s program of preventive care.

“I was presenting the smoking cessation program to Kaiser’s board of directors, and at the end of the presentation, they declined to fund it, which I expected,” Waltzer recalls. “I already had my letter of resignation typed up and ready to go. I walked across the hall and handed it in. This was nearly unheard of. Most people leave Kaiser either by dying or retiring, not leaving relatively abruptly to start a company.”

In Patel’s case, most of his colleagues found out he would be pursuing a business opportunity when he was granted his leave of absence from his residency. Their reaction: good-natured envy.

“Some of them thought I was crazy, but only because I had put so many years into my medical education,” he says with a laugh. “They were very encouraging, with some saying they wished they had the guts to do something like that. I just felt, ‘I MUST do this.’” ■

Barbara Alden Wilson, a Florida-based freelance writer, is a regular contributor to UO.