

# Perils and Pleasures of Private Practice - An Update

Irene E.M. Paton<sup>1</sup>

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*This article considers aspects of working as a counsellor in private practice. Particular attention is given to issues arising for counsellors working from home. The author draws on her own experience and relevant literature in discussing possible difficulties for the counsellor and the counselling profession as a whole, as well as the satisfactions and advantages that are possible from working in this way.*

## Introduction

The world of counselling has expanded considerably over the last ten years, to the point where it has now become common for the media to inform us of people in or after crises being offered counselling. As more people experience the benefits of counselling, its acceptance is increasing and more opportunities are created for counsellors to work in a variety of settings. The most noticeable increase has been in those people choosing to work privately. Funding from ACC, Family Court, Disability Allowance, CYP and EAP schemes, has given many counsellors a financial base from which to begin despite the fact that there are advantages as well as disadvantages in working for these funding providers.

There is, however, a noticeable lack of written material on this topic within this country, and hence the need to make the issues more visible to assist those contemplating working in this way. Symes (1994, p.6.) provides a definition of working in private practice which "involves accepting referrals, counselling clients in one's own time, using one's own premises and charging a fee." Counsellors choose to work privately in a variety of ways - in a group or agency, in a

commercial setting on their own, or in their own home. With the experience of having set up in private practice both in a rural community and then in a large city, the author has learnt by trial and error of the pitfalls. The purpose of this article is to explore not only the perils involved in working in this way but also the pleasures which provide the attraction to move in this direction. Particular attention will be given to working in private practice from home, as distinct from an agency or group practice.

## Perils

There are many pitfalls for the beginning counsellor in private practice and as a result, extra stress may be added to an already difficult period of time. Discussion is centered around the following themes: financial issues; professional isolation; boundary and safety issues, including vulnerabilities with clients and maintaining boundaries between home and work; and wider issues for the profession as a whole including privacy of information and accountability.

**Financial issues:** In financial terms, a misleading impression may be created by the fact that a person in private practice may earn between \$30 and \$90 per hour for counselling and consultation services. Many tasks are performed which are not chargeable (e.g. phone calls, writing reports, writing references, attending supervision or counselling, workshops and meetings professional reading). When holidays are taken there is no income being generated. The hourly rate therefore needs to be viewed in relation to the whole picture of the counsellor's work style. Attendance at workshops or conferences has a different financial meaning for private practitioners from its significance for those in salaried positions because not only do they have to pay for the cost of the workshop but they also lose that time when they could be seeing clients and earning money.

If a person in private practice has no other

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1. The author's private practice in Christchurch currently comprises providing supervision, counselling, therapy, reviewing the work of other counsellors, training counsellors and being a representative on NZAC National Executive.

source of financial support, then there is greater vulnerability to the possible fluctuations in level of income that can result from working privately. It is necessary to have a pool of money as a base, which can help alleviate the stress of times when income levels fall below the budgeted amount.

A further difficulty can arise when the caring and empathy the counsellor may feel for the client, overshadows the counsellor's need to earn an income, and results in either a lowering or waiving of the fee for the session. Listening to the financial difficulties of a client and not allowing feelings of sympathy to cause a shifting of the boundary regarding fees can pose a considerable challenge for a counsellor.

The level of fees charged can be perceived as linked to counsellors' sense of themselves as competent, skilled workers who have a valuable service to offer. In the beginning there can be a tendency either to under-value one's services as represented by the fees set, or to inflate one's value when counsellors set their fees much higher than is reasonable. It is important to keep in mind the ethical principle in the NZAC Code of Ethics which states: *When setting fees the Counsellor should ensure that they are fair, reasonable, commensurate with the service provided and give due regard to the client's ability to pay.*

One of the greatest dangers for the beginning practitioner is the payment of taxes. In the first year of operation novices may not allow for regular savings to pay their taxes or GST, and then find themselves in the following year owing large sums of money at certain times of the year. However skilled private practitioners maybe in the area of counselling, a knowledge of basic accountancy practices and/or access to good financial advice is also essential.

**Professional Isolation:** Professional isolation and burnout are very important considerations for private practitioners, because if they are working on their own, there is no one to observe how many hours a day they are working, or any signs of burnout which may be evident. In some ways the opportunity to have a quiet time during lunchtime, with no people around can be very beneficial when a counsellor's work is primarily listening to people. However, when working alone there is a need to maintain contact with

colleagues on a regular basis, in addition to attendance at supervision which assumes particular importance in the monitoring of workload and support of the counsellor to prevent burnout.

Counsellors also need to establish boundaries for themselves in terms of the number of client contact hours maintained, and include in their diaries the time available for the unseen extras and recharging time (e.g. George Sweet's notion of *The Art of the Full Diary!*). Otherwise it is very easy to fill the page with times for clients and work too many hours in the day. Belson (1992) outlines a number of enlightening points in *Ten Tried-and-True Methods to Achieve Therapist Burnout*. An example that rather appeals: *2. Take on lots of hard cases and see them one after another, preferably three or four in a row. Think about them even when not at work-at dinner and at 3 a.m. are good times* (p.11). This highlights the need to monitor caseloads and it is easy, especially when first starting in private practice to take on everyone who makes an approach to you. This can be dangerous, if a counsellor is working outside their areas of expertise and is therefore more likely to do harm to their clients. It is also possible that caseloads can become unbalanced, with too many difficult clients who may be struggling with the same issue. This is most noticeable with work in the area of sexual abuse. Wendy Maltz (1994) suggests that it is important to have *sexual abuse free zones*, to have a balanced practice, with a variety of work (e.g. supervising, research) and to actively allow for opportunities to recharge, given that the work of a counsellor can be very draining and demanding.

Other realities of private practice, related to the theme of professional isolation, include the lack of opportunity for promotion, fear of malpractice suits and handling interdisciplinary competition.

**Boundary and Safety Issues:** Some general issues that all counsellors face, especially beginners, include maintaining clarity of boundaries. This is particularly important for the beginning counsellor in private practice.

As containment is one of the main features of any good counselling relationship, it is just as

important for this to be part of the dynamics in a private practice from home. It is not as easy for someone working in this way to hold suicidal clients and maintain private, non-work time, and this situation can be extremely demanding and testing of the counsellor's boundaries. Kelley, Alexander and Cullinane (1986) point out that when clients are in emergency situations, the counsellor needs to be aware of the problem of false assurance and the danger of placing confidence in backup that is inadequate or does not exist. Having medical and psychiatric consultants as a backup, and working in cooperation with existing professional services the client is using are important even though there can be potential for conflict about the care of the client.

Contracting and assessment are particularly important when working in private practice, in order that it is clear to the client what the boundaries are and what is expected of them in the process. Establishing the purpose of the initial visit as an assessment time for the client and the counsellor is recommended, "*particularly in the area of predicting the possibility of violent behaviour and other kinds of acting out*" (Symes 1994, p.43). Counsellors in their own home or alone in an office are in most danger from violent or seductive clients. Symes suggests only accepting referrals from another professional as a way of alleviating these dangers. The use of checklists for the counsellor and for clients, can assist in this two way process of establishing a fit for both parties.

The private practitioner can also be more vulnerable to encouraging clients' dependency on him or her, which while it may assist the counsellor's emotional and financial needs, is not an ethical or professional practice. Private practitioners can also be more at risk from agreeing to see clients who are outside their area of skills and knowledge, on the basis that it is better to have some clients than none at all. There can be a temptation for financial reasons, to pressure clients into coming. When a client cancels an appointment, it is important to be aware of what is said and how the response is given by the counsellor, as frustration and disappointment may not be evident in the words

but may surface in the way the words are spoken.

At times when the counsellor working from home moves house, there needs to be sufficient notice and time to process the change, both before and after the shift.

There is also a greater need in private practice for contingency plans for any emergency situations that may arise for the counsellor, when a supervisor or another counsellor could notify clients, and assist them to find ways of processing the sudden termination or need for a break in therapy.

Some specific perils that need to be addressed include the lack of anonymity that is inherent in working from home and the effect on the family of this way of working. Symes (1994, p.24) believes the former will affect the material the client brings in terms of transference and projections. The possibility of envy fuelled by real knowledge as well as transference - based assumptions is much greater.

Another potential peril is the difficulty of preventing the family from creating distractions. Balancing the needs of the practice with the needs of the family can be problematic. How children respond to clients who are arriving or leaving from a session and to telephone calls from clients needs to be addressed to protect all parties. It may be that there is envy in the family towards clients who have uninterrupted time with their parent or partner, which they may not receive as readily. Also the family's space is invaded by other people and there may be resentment in having to modify their behaviour to accommodate the counsellor's need for quietness during sessions.

### Privacy of Information

Being clear about constraints around giving out information can be difficult, especially with the pressure lawyers can place to gain information about their client or their client's spouse. Working alone, these pressures can feel harder to resist. Sending information to clients needs to be monitored carefully. Permission needs to be received from the client to send any letters or accounts to their place of employment or to their homes. Maintaining confidentiality is

essential and a minor slip on the part of the counsellor could have a major impact for the client e.g. sending information to a work place and not putting the name of the person on the envelope or a confidential stamp, means it could be opened by others who may not handle the information sensitively and cause difficulties for the client.

With the Privacy of Information Act (1993) it is now possible for clients to gain access to the records counsellors may write about them. If the counsellor has also kept notes from supervision intermingled with the client notes, it may not be appropriate for the client to view these. Hence it is advisable to retain a separate record of notes from supervision. Kelley et al (1986) suggest keeping good process records, with goals and planned interventions, and keeping notes about specific content issues for the client separately. Once clients have finished counselling, it is the counsellor's responsibility to offer the notes back to the client and if requested destroy them safely, although there is also a belief supporting the retaining of records, especially for long term clients.

Storage of information is another possible pitfall for counsellors. It could be easier for identifiable information to be seen by others if the information is left out and the rooms are also used by other people. Although this country has large areas of more concentrated populations, it is also small in the sense that the connections people have within a city and around the country make the possible spread of information more likely. The possibility of exposure is even more likely in the rural areas where the population is smaller and people know each other more.

### Accountability

For the profession as a whole, there are perils to address in that there are not the same accountability processes in private practice as there are in agencies or organisations. Counsellors can make choices about record keeping, fees, types of clients using the service, standards of practice and methods; and there are no checks on supervision, case consultation or staff development training as there would be in

an agency. With the current "boom" in counselling, especially in private practice it would appear that this way of working is attracting many people. In 1993, 18% or 123 of 681 NZAC members were in the "private practice" category; in December 1995 this had increased to 535 or 31% of 1703 members.

It is not possible to tell from these figures if these people work from home or from an agency.

As Symes (1994) suggested though, the reasons for choosing counselling in private practice might not always be good ones, although they may be valid. He also believed there was no evidence to support the beliefs that no service is good unless it is paid for, or that the best counsellors are in the private sector.

Confidence in competence is challenged more when working privately, and responsibility for the success or failure of the business rests with the individual person. This leaves practitioners vulnerable to allowing their own needs for an income to cloud their perception of the freedom of clients to choose how many sessions they need and when to end counselling. Particularly vulnerable clients may want to please the counsellor and may not have a strong sense of themselves, hence they may allow themselves to be guided by the advice of the counsellor.

As a group, counsellors working in private practice may lack collective support which can leave them vulnerable to vendorship schemes (e.g. ACC, Disability Allowance) and outside control. This is where the NZAC has been able to provide a focal point to give more weight to concerns of private practitioners.

Previously counselling has struggled to establish its identity and regulate itself as a profession, and this could be perceived to be most acute with private practitioners. As Symes (1994, p.109) points out: "*There is no employer to hire counsellors of an appropriate standard and to fire those who behave unprofessionally.*" A concerning aspect of the growth of counsellors working in this way is the freedom of anyone to set up initially, and there is presently no way of establishing the levels of experience and qualifications needed for working in private practice as well as the specialist areas within the field. Symes (1994, p.12) suggests a counsellor

needs 10 years experience before setting up privately and that as there is "little quality control of courses or counsellors, so the increased numbers of counsellors does not necessarily mean higher standards."

This can be regulated informally through referrals and open discussion in local professional meetings. However the effectiveness of this is questionable in protecting the vulnerable client from approaching a counsellor with whom they may be at risk. Does the NZAC have a responsibility to be regulating this process? The Association is often approached to provide names of counsellors, and the private practice survey completed recently was a means of gathering information to meet this need. Although there was a significant response to this request, it does not mean that the safety or standard of the work of the counsellor is able to be assured. The only assurance that can be given are the levels of training and supervision that are set as criteria for membership. As this has only been formalised in the last three years, those people who applied before this time may not have the same level of training.

Would a national register of private practitioners who meet set criteria, be a way of maintaining standards? Incorporated into this could possibly be statutory inspection of the services counsellors offer, with some completed evaluation questionnaires from clients which could be sent to the professional association at the termination of counselling. Further consideration needs to be given to these issues.

### Pleasures

Once the challenges of setting up have been overcome and a practice is solidly established, the pleasures can be experienced more fully. It is interesting to note the personality characteristics of people who succeed in private practice. Traditionally, counsellors are seen as caring people who respond with empathy to the plight of their clients. In contrast, running a successful business requires the profile of the typical entrepreneur, which has been found to include the need for achievement, and internal locus of control, higher risk taking propensity, and higher

ambiguity tolerance (Levin & Levinsky, 1990). People with these characteristics are therefore more likely to survive the early stages as long as they can maintain a balance between demonstrating empathy and the business aspects of their work. This is an area that warrants further research.

The motivations which influence people to move into this field are an indication of what possible pleasures there are in working in this way. Butler (1992) suggests some examples - the wish to have freedom to choose treatment modalities, the wish to be one's own boss, the desire for greater earning capacity or greater choice with this, and the wish to have flexible working hours. This is also emphasized by others: professional autonomy, especially in terms of the freedom to do the types of interventions desired, the desire to be independent, and enhancement of professional status were perceived by social workers as some of the reasons for entering private practice (Hardcastle & Brownstein, 1989). Rather than being bound by agency requirements, the freedom to choose the type of clients, narrow the focus of work to that which is most enjoyable for the practitioner and change the balance of the work, are also attractions.

Anne Wilson-Schaefer (1992) found that once she had the policy that she only agreed to undertake the kind of work she loved, her efficiency improved and the requests for her work increased. Although economically this may not be possible, especially in the early stages, it could be a worthwhile goal.

Being able to choose the hours of work which are commensurate with optimum working periods of the day and blending this with other aspects of the counsellor's life, has particular appeal, especially with the changing seasons. If a practitioner is also a parent, it is possible to maintain more involvement with the latter role when working from home. If there are cancellations, it is possible to use that time in more creative ways than if bound by agency expectations. The freedom to choose holiday times is also helpful, without the needs of other workers having to be taken into account as in an agency.

Speaking in relation to independent social

workers, Kelley et al (1986, p.8) suggest there are "opportunities for creativity, autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic rules and restrictions". This can manifest in various ways, and the setting in which one works can be more closely controlled. Both clients and counsellor benefit from this, and by choosing to work in a suburb, parking problems for clients and the counsellor are also removed. The way a waiting room or office space is decorated and presented can also reflect his creativity.

### Conclusion

It is interesting to note that in this article there is a much larger section devoted to the perils compared with the pleasures of working in private practice. Whilst the quantity of the first may be greater, the pleasures can far outweigh the perils. It also appears that while this article has explored many issues associated with working from home in private practice, it also identifies areas which need to be investigated further.

Although some ways have been identified in which the National Association is meeting the needs of counsellors in private practice, further research could be undertaken, possibly including a questionnaire to ascertain private practitioners' views. Despite the sample size being small, the recent publication (UCEN Research Group, 1994) has provided a useful insight into working in private practice.

Other questions which need to be addressed include protection for clients from unethical or unprofessional behaviour of counsellors who work in this way, and whether the current Code of Ethics gives sufficient emphasis to this aspect. Worthy of further investigation is also the extent to which counsellor educators are addressing issues relating to private practice, in their training of counsellors.

If the movement of the last three years is indicative of future growth, there will be more people moving into counselling as private practitioners and therefore there is a need to monitor and encourage the sharing of information relevant to this area of work. This may create a dilemma for private practitioners,

in that every hour spent at the computer in work time, is an hour less of income generation, unlike workers in salaried positions in which writing articles about their work or doing research may be part of their job description.

It is exciting to know that the option of working from home is viable for many who work in the counselling field, but there needs to be a balance of accountability and protection for both the clients and the counsellors in order to ensure that the image of counselling is not tarnished by unprofessional practices.

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