

Paddington Cat Hospital down to their focus on building a loyal customer base that appreciates specialised care.

“We know a lot of the people who walk through our door and we like building up those relationships,” she says. “We get an immediate message to people that everybody who works here likes cats. There is also the fact that because we only see cats, there aren’t any dogs on the premises so that means it’s far less stressful for the cats.”

However, Drs Catt and Baral are not interested in growth for growth’s sake. “By and large we are happy with how we are growing,” says Dr Catt. “We have remained a fairly small boutique practice, which is what we want. We don’t want to become a very large practice because we feel we would lose a lot of the reason people come to us and why we do it so well.”

### Passion before profits

Dr Adrian Gallagher, owner and principal veterinarian at Brisbane Bird Vet agrees that building a niche practice takes time, and those seeking rapid growth need not apply.

After graduating in 1985, he purchased the busy Brighton Veterinary Surgery in 1992 and worked in general practice before moving into specialised avian medicine. “Before graduation I knew I was going to be an avian vet but it took a long time to get there,” he says. “Brighton was a four-and-a-half vet, seven-day-per-week practice and probably a third of that case load was avian.

“When I decided that was able to support me, I gleaned off a third of the avian component, sold the dog and cat portion of the business, and set up the Brisbane Bird Vet.”

Brisbane Bird Vet is currently a two-vet, five-day-per-week practice, which suits Dr Gallagher. “With the Brisbane Bird Vet, I was determined not to go down the road of having a seven-day-per-week, multi-vet practice again,” he says. “Working seven days a week doesn’t make me a happy person. Now I have a better work/life balance and am passionate about what I do. There is rarely a day that I wake up and don’t want to come to work.”

The opportunity to follow his passion is also the most important factor for



**DR ADRIAN GALLAGHER** “There is rarely a day that I wake up and don’t want to come to work.”



**DR MELISSA CATT** “Opening a vet hospital for a niche market seemed to be the sensible thing to do.”



**DR RICHMOND LOH** “If it’s your area of passion, you should certainly pursue it.”

Perth-based Dr Richmond Loh. He set up The Fish Vet in 2002 as a hobby business to complement his work as a veterinary pathologist. Now The Fish Vet network extends to Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra. However, Dr Loh is the first to admit a niche practice isn’t the fastest path to riches.

“If it’s your area of passion, you should certainly pursue it. However, I don’t think it will make you instantly rich. If you are just doing it for money, then I don’t think you will be very successful.”

### Vets without borders

Both Drs Gallagher and Loh have turned to the internet to help grow their practices beyond the local confines of a traditional general practice.

For Dr Gallagher, around 85 to 90 per cent of his clientele are companion animal owners, and he receives a lot of referrals from general practices that don’t feel comfortable treating birds. He’s also running a growing phone consultation service.

“We have clients from Darwin, North Queensland and NSW. With the internet, they can take pictures of their birds, send them to us and we can follow up with a phone consultation,” he says.

Dr Loh has also had some marketing success via his YouTube channel. “Clients find me through my YouTube channel called The Fish Doctor, which has attracted 20,000 subscribers. The videos we post help us to work up some street credibility, and let people know that there are treatment options available for their fish.”

Likewise, at the Paddington Cat Hospital, the customer base is not just limited to people in their immediate vicinity. They have seen clients from as far away as Lithgow and the Central Coast. However, Dr Catt is quick to point out that niche success doesn’t happen by accident.

“We spent a lot of time going through a business plan, looking at where to open the practice, what sort of money to put into it, what sort of equipment we needed to begin with,” she says.

“For some people, opening a niche practice is the right thing to do, while others may be better off staying in general practice. It’s a very personal decision.” ➤