Entrepreneurship and the Retinal Physician

By Allen Chiang, MD

In this installment of The First 5 Years, I interview David Rhee, MD, of Long Island Vitreoretinal Consultants, who provides some insights into his experience as a vitreoretinal surgeon and entrepreneur. Along with fellow vitreoretinal surgeons Vincent Deramo, MD, and Brett Rosenblatt, MD, Dr. Rhee is a cofounder of ConnectOnCall, a novel, cloud-based, on-call system. ConnectOnCall provides conveniences and features that exceed traditional answering services by integrating patient data from various electronic health record (EHR) systems. As a result, doctors, office staff, and patients all have an improved experience with after-hours communication.

—Allen Chiang, MD

Tell us about your company and how the idea for it came about.

One night, Drs. Deramo, Rosenblatt, and I were sitting around at dinner, and Dr. Rosenblatt excused himself to take a call from a patient with an emergency. He returned after about 20 minutes and remarked that there had to be a better way to handle calls from patients. The three of us began discussing some of the problems with taking calls (eg, receiving incorrect patient information, blocking caller IDs, documenting phone calls, etc.). We realized that the traditional way of taking a call with a live answering service did not have the infrastructure to keep pace with emerging health care trends, including Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance and the federal requirement for EHRs.

We agreed that the system we wanted to use as practicing physicians had to be designed from scratch. Of course, taking this proposition on ourselves was technically difficult and incredibly time-intensive because we all had rather productive and busy day jobs. When we were about 6 months into the project, we discussed scrapping the idea, and almost did. But we knew that it was something that had to happen because if we did not make the product, someone else would, and the thought of using someone else’s system instead of our own propelled us forward.

We think we have created a fantastic, all-digital on-call solution that physicians will want to use. It allows doctors to have all the relevant information they need, call back patients with one touch, and document what they did with little or no effort, all while maintaining full HIPAA and Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health compliance.

What were some of the critical steps you took to get your idea off the ground?

The first thing you have to do is fully invest yourself emotionally. Without that commitment, all other investments will fail. If Drs. Deramo, Rosenblatt, and I were not passionate about our product, I doubt we would have gotten as far as we have. Part of the emotional investment also includes a realization that starting a new company is going to be time-intensive; having the backing of your family and/or spouse is paramount.

After engaging a team of programmers and app developers, we developed a working prototype that was generously used by our own retina practice as well as a second beta test site. Real-world testing makes a significant difference; after the product was used by doctors, patients, and office staff, we were really able to refine the service. Our colleagues also spread the word to other practices, and our business began to grow organically.

How did you secure the capital to fund this idea? Did you encounter any other barriers?

We have mainly been bootstrapping the company ourselves. We are at the point with our company where our subscriber base and revenue are somewhat self-sustaining. To grow to the next order of magnitude, we will have to begin more formal rounds of funding, which we are working on right now with venture capitalists and other investors.

What sort of professional help or mentorship, if any, did you obtain to formulate a business plan, market the company, and gain traction, as well as to manage the company’s intellectual property?

We have been fortunate to meet some great people in the industry. One of our mentors is the CEO of a large, multinational tech corporation that he helped found. Another of my personal friends is the CEO of a crowdsourcing site. Both of these people have helped us since the beginning and have been generous beyond compare.

My colleagues and I realized quickly that creating something of this magnitude requires not just a great concept with smart ideas but also a network of friends and colleagues who can call upon their own skill sets to get ideas from paper to reality.
Discuss some of the notable risks, challenges, or lessons learned thus far.

We have faced some large hurdles in designing a system that meets the needs of different types of practice arrangements. For example, we initially created the software with our own practice in mind; however, we were surprised to find many different variations in the way practices deal with assigning calls, handling messages, and documenting doctor-patient interactions. We overcame this by building into the software multiple methods of offering options that we can customize to each practice (eg, a Spanish-language toggle option). Listening to feedback and customizing our app for our clients’ needs has led to a much more robust and useful product.

How have you managed to grow this business while maintaining a busy clinical retina practice?

In the early days, we hosted a few webinars at the end of busy OR days. We try to ensure that the parts of one career do not become a distraction for the other. As vitreoretinal surgeons, we are accustomed to focusing on what is important when needed. I am sure most of your readership could finish a membrane peel with the fire alarm going off. Similarly, we are able to maintain focus on our patients when needed and keep the two worlds separate. It has definitely been helpful to remind ourselves that we have really good day jobs.

What advice do you have for new retina specialists who are contemplating an entrepreneurial venture?

Remember that it is essentially another job, and, because we want to remain 100% committed to our practice and our patients, the minimal free time we have each day will have to be dedicated to that second job.

That said, if you are passionate about an idea, do your research. Be well aware of the market, the competition, the barriers to entry, and the competitive advantages of your idea. If at the end of your research phase you still feel strongly that the idea is worth the sacrifice of time, energy, and money, then by all means go for it. So far, for me, the journey has been exciting, educational, and rewarding.

Allen Chiang, MD, is an attending surgeon on the Wills Eye Hospital Retina Service, a physician with Mid Atlantic Retina, and an assistant clinical professor of ophthalmology at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Chiang may be reached at achiang@midatlanticretina.com.

David Rhee, MD, is the CTO of ConnectOnCall.com. He is a vitreoretinal surgeon at Long Island Vitreoretinal Consultants in Great Neck, New York, and is an associate clinical professor of ophthalmology at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York. Dr. Rhee may be reached at david@connectoncall.com.