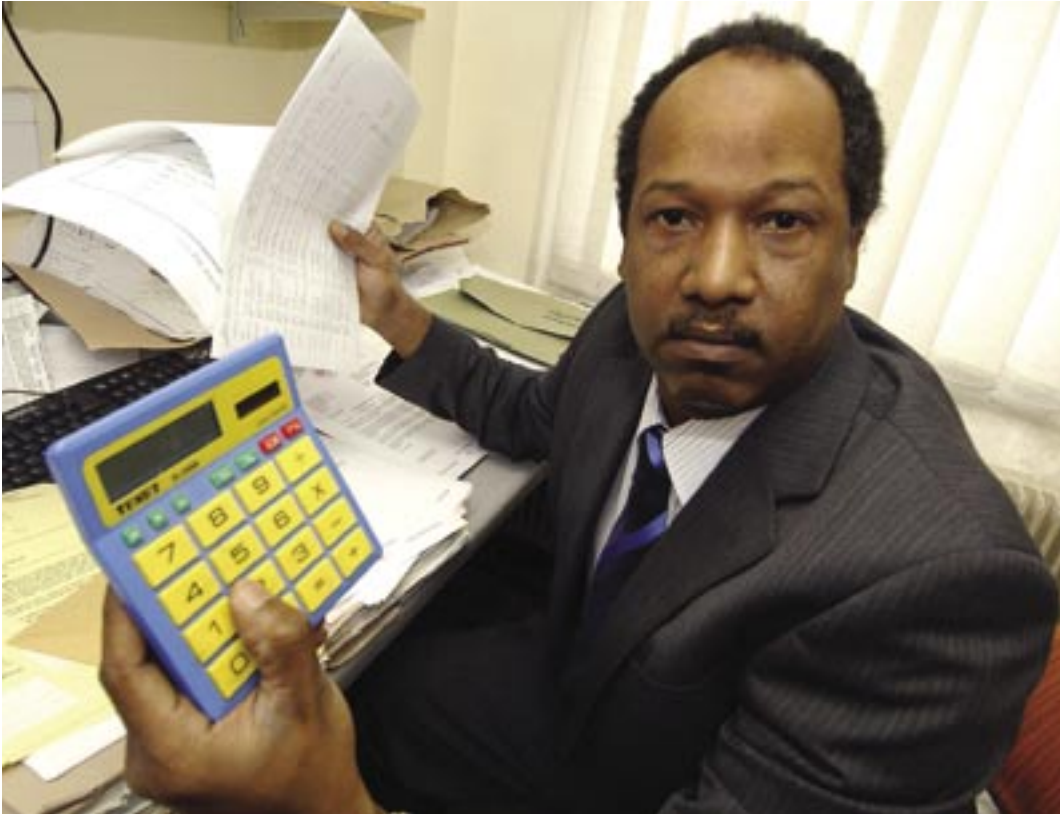# Super time-saver

When colorectal surgeon **Mr Steve McKain** (above) took the plunge and moved to an electronic billing system, he effectively bought back his life – and saved money, too. He describes what happened

THERE ARE only so many hours in a day. Even for consultants.

It doesn't matter how closely you monitor your working hours in terms of actually treating patients, if you balance those hours against your sleeping hours and your family or other lifestyle hours, many of us find there just never seems to be enough time in the day.

For consultants who spend hours in the administration of their practice, burning the midnight oil or giving up their Sundays for the joy of invoicing (and all its complications), the evenings and weekends disappear even faster.

'It is not surprising that so many consultants lose so many hours to the "simple" chore of making sure they are actually paid'

How long you spend on invoicing depends on a whole raft of patient- and number-driven questions:
• How many patients you see in a month;
• How many treatment episodes they go through;
• Whether it is, say, a one-off day surgery on a meniscus tear for a fit young man you might not see again, or just one of a complex series of procedures that stretch depressingly into the future for a familiar patient;
• Whether a new patient has come to you from another practice – or has, for example, the patient with heart disease been to you before with peripheral vascular disease?

Remember that every aspect of a bill has to be found in a filing system, whether computerised or paper-based, and added to the invoice, along with treatment history, payment history, insurance data and many other details.

Pricing, charging, invoicing, chasing, querying – even finding time to buy stamps – is all a bit of a slog, and it is not surprising that so many consultants lose so many hours to the 'simple' chore of making sure they are actually paid for what they do.

Getting to grips

It is an issue that we are gradually getting to grips with, although it seems to be only on an individual basis. There are still thousands of independent practitioners out there, for example, who still use envelopes and stamps, and are at the mercy of Royal Mail when it comes to their cash flow.

What's more precious – time or money? There is a vociferous school of thought that proclaims the two to be almost synonymous. What I have at last discovered is that the adoption of one single, simple system could satisfy the unarguable values of both.

Electronic billing has been around for a long time and, rather like soap powder, there have been several new, improved versions over the years. But we are at a stage now where not only is the system up to scratch but it is backed by proof, in the form of figures, that the latest version available can save us so much time that we can claim back family time, sleeping time, playtime or even just time to fit in even more paying patients.

Until recently, for example, my family would have to do without me for at least one evening a week. Then, like a Smirnoff moment, I discovered ePractice biller. And I have my Tuesdays back.

Almost nostalgically now, I can think back to how it used to be: 'What does the procedure cost? Is the patient insured? By whom? Is the treatment actually covered by the insurance? Where do they live? Who is the referring doctor? What is their treatment history?' It all took so much time to find it out and fill it in. And I am sure it contributed greatly to my silver locks.

And no matter how painstaking your search, queries are some-

times inevitable. You might mis-type a reference number, a patient's insurance has actually run out or perhaps a duplicate has been sent by mistake.

Then there's the wait for payment.

If you have sent a paper invoice by post, and expect a cheque or BACS payment in response, you know that no matter how stream-lined the insurance companies' systems are, the wait, especially if there are queries on the claim, can cause cash-flow blips. Queries mean more time spent answering questions and following up res-ponses, and more waiting for settlement.

Time-consuming calls
At any point, the only way you can hurry things along, or at least try to find out what stage things are at, is by time-consuming phone calls that often involve leaving messages and, yes, more waiting for responses.

It's fair to say that paperwork was taking over my social life, my family time and my sleep. I would spend ages working in the evening to find out who had not paid me, then more time the following day chasing them up.

I frequently spent as much as half-an-hour on each bill: creating it, printing it, posting it and then following it up. And more time spent chasing outstanding pay-ments, only to find that, in some cases, the information was inaccu-rate and had to be resent.

I know I was not alone in finding billing a nightmare. Lots of suc-cessful consultants find that the

'I now spend less than two minutes per bill and can see unpaid bills on one screen. It's so quick and easy to learn and it eliminates paperwork'

busier they get, the more they bill, and the cycle of billing, chasing bills, perhaps correcting them and then resending them – only to have to chase them up again – soon becomes a full-time job.

Then, one day, a colleague rec-ommended that I went over to electronic billing. I started finding out about it, and the words 'at the click of a button' had never sounded more attractive.

I have since found that it is something that more and more consultants are using, as they find out about the time savings, the cost savings, and the simplicity of the process. Within a week of starting the system, I was able to spend more time with my family.

I now spend less than two min-utes per bill and can see unpaid bills on one screen. There are no queries, as all the data is prevali-dated, and my cash flow and my time have been streamlined. It's so quick and easy to learn and it eliminates paperwork.

Obviously, different consultants – whether single-handed or work-ing in practices – have different workloads and different incomes, depending on a variety of factors. Some employ full-time secretaries who spend much of their time billing in the traditional way. But a cost-comparison study has recently been carried out that proved that even consultants with a very low bill turnover will save time and money by using ePractice biller. It's the latest internet-based system from Healthcode, and the study found out that it pays for itself after only eight bills per year, based on a

time saving of nine minutes per bill at an hourly rate of £150.

It showed that paper billing costs £27.50 per bill, on average. This assumes the time is spent by a consultant handling the admin-istration and using normal first-class post. If high numbers of bills are queried and returned, the cost is even higher.

Independently verified
With its automatically populated fields and one-click transmission, ePractice biller costs me just £180 a year.

The study and its findings have been independently verified by London chartered accountants Lake Bushells. The model used assumed four trouble-free trans-actions, where claims and pay-ments went through without hitches, to every one transaction where there would be queries and other hold-ups – though anecdotal evidence suggests this is a con-servative view.

So: can you apply professional fees to your personal time? Personally, I think my free time is priceless, but it is still nice to know that the professional time I am saving is worth thousands of pounds a year.

Mr McKain is a colorectal surgeon at St Joseph's Hospital, Newport, Gwent

• *More information on ePractice biller at www.healthcode.co.uk, or call 01784 263150*

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HOW ELECTRONIC BILLING WORKS
■ **It replaces paper invoicing and cuts time spent on billing and credit control**
■ **It uses the internet to provide secure online billing and payment tracking**
■ **Billing information is sent directly to www.healthcode.co.uk**
■ **ePractice biller auto-populates billing information, and instantly provides patient account and treatment history**
■ **Users access details of work, in private hospitals and some private patient units, quickly and accurately**
■ **Users simply log on, select the patient, open a bill, select information from drop-down menus, add the fee and click 'send'**

Healthcode is the UK's largest clearing house for medical insurance bills and is owned by some of the UK's major insurers and hospital groups