A prosperous retirement
If you want to transfer your pension fund for even greater financial flexibility, perhaps you should consider an Income Drawdown Pension? Thomas Dickson explains what exactly it is and why it’s a good option.

Retiring NHS dentists receive a pension based on their final salary, but many will also have invested in a personal pension and must decide how the benefits will be paid. Currently, 25 per cent of the pension fund may be taken as a tax-free lump sum and the remainder as taxable income.

Most accept the default option of an annuity paid by the same pension provider, while some transfer their fund in pursuit of a higher annuity return. However, there’s still a further option: an Income Drawdown Plan (IDP), which provides significantly greater flexibility and merits consideration by those whose fund exceeds six figures.

Regular cash payments
With an IDP, you withdraw a regular income within limits set by HM Revenue & Customs, which you can vary according to your needs, while the remainder of your fund remains invested until you reach the age of 75. After this age, your pension will depend on the residual value of your fund and may be lower than a conventional annuity taken immediately on retirement.

The maximum permitted withdrawals are based on the calculations of the Government’s Actuary Department and recalculated every five years to reflect the remaining funds and current annuity rates. At age 75, you must buy an annuity or transfer to an Alternatively Secured Pension. These phased withdrawals allow annual income to include both the tax-free cash and the taxable income, provide improved death benefits and often reduce tax liabilities.

Who does it suit?
An IDP can be taken out by anyone aged between 50 and 75 (55 from 2010), and may be suitable for you if:
• You expect your pension income needs to vary from year to year, for example if you continue to work as a locum you may be able to reduce your higher rate tax liability.
• You want your pension fund to benefit from potential growth while accepting that its value may fall rather than rise.
• You have other sources of income.
• You want to maximise the benefits for your family after your death.
• You want to maximise your present income, while retaining future security and some control over your pension assets.

The principal disadvantage of IDD compared with a conventional annuity is reduced income security. For example, your fund may not perform as well as you anticipate and when you do purchase an annuity, your income will be reduced. You also need to take into account that:
• Annuity rates vary. If you defer a purchase until the last moment you will have to accept the rates available at that time.
• The charges for an IDP are higher than for a conventional annuity.
• Annuity rates depend on mortality rates, and those who die earlier cross subsidise those who live longer. If you delay buying an annuity you will lose this subsidy, and there is no guarantee your fund will grow sufficiently to compensate.

Take your pick
If you decide an IDP is right for you, select your investments with care, relating the returns to the degree of risk you are prepared to accept. If you intend to withdraw income immediately, a proportion of the fund should be in cash deposits, since withdrawals from equity investments can have a disproportionately negative impact on the initial fund value. Once the cash fund has been exhausted, actual and predicted investment performance should determine the source of later withdrawals.

A number of providers offer IDPs, and your choice should take into account their relative financial strength, service levels and charging structures, and whether they offer large fund discounts and a fail-safe programme to automatically transfer funds into equities, particularly important in today’s turbulent economic climate. Other factors to consider are the internal SIPP bank interest rate, the number of external investment funds, and whether the trustees are an IDP can make all the difference.

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Dental practice owners seeking to sell up, usually ask an agent how to do it quickly, while maximising the value of their asset. With the Internet now a major part of all our lives, Google is often the first port of call for practice vendors.

However, as many of us have learned from experience, when you use the Internet, it's good to exercise a little caution. Instituting a Google search for a specific company or product generates a list of names or 'sponsored links' on the right side of the screen, each with some relevance to the search. These advertisers have to pay Google every time a user clicks on them, and they also 'bid' for places on the list, so those willing to pay the most are placed at the top.

To prevent companies bidding on thousands of key words and intruding their names into irrelevant searches on the off-chance they'll find a customer, Google drops advertisements which fail to attract sufficient clicks, effectively making such an approach counter productive. However, a practice which regularly deters the more ethical website owners and advertisers is using a competitor's trademarked name as a keyword to introduce an alien advertisement.

Meeting the competition
Although we put time and effort into ensuring we provide the best service to our clients, a Google search for ‘Frank Taylor’ invariably produces sponsored advertisements for rival companies whose only purpose is in including their name in your key-words is to take advantage of our reputation.

At present, this is perfectly legal and Google is under no obligation to prevent it. A spokesperson for Google's Trademark Complaint Procedures, says: ‘From May 5 2008 we will no longer review a term corresponding to the trademarked term as a keyword trigger. When we receive a complaint from a trademark owner, we will only investigate the use of the trademark in ad text.’

In other words, as long as the text which appears on the screen does not include the injured company’s name, Google will take no action.

Choosing wisely
For most dentists, buying or selling a practice is a pivotal moment in their lives, and peace of mind depends on complete confidence in their agent’s integrity and competence. Even with the benefit of a recommendation, before making a commitment, vendors should satisfy themselves their choice meets the criteria to provide a professional and efficient service.

Experience within the retail dental sector is vital. Even compared with other healthcare businesses, dental practices have unique characteristics and requirements for success. Among the many factors, which influence a final valuation, your agent must understand such matters as catchment areas, local demographics, goodwill and the transfer of patient confidence to a new incumbent.

Although your agent is working for you, their valuation must be independent and without bias. Expect it to be based on visits to the practice to review not merely its physical assets – premises and equipment – but also its current financial status, potential for expansion and how it compares with other local practices, which have recently come to the market. There may also be specific factors in particular cases that only an experienced agent will identify. Some principals invite a number of valuations, but while an inflated figure may be gratifying, it will not achieve a satisfactory result.

No timewasters please!
It’s likely that pending a sale you will continue to work, and an experienced agent will weed out the time wasters and offer your practice only to serious potential buyers. You also need to be confident that your business’s commercially sensitive data is in safe hands, and that your patients will be comfortable with the attitude and policy of the new owners.

Of course, if you’re on the other side of the fence and seeking to purchase a practice, approaching a specialist agent is also the first step. The best agents will take time to discuss in detail your professional ambitions and location preferences, and have exclusive access to properties currently available. Taking care to understand the client’s individual aspirations is the key to providing the highest-quality service.

References
1 http://www.askdavetaylor.com/what_is_deceptive_keyword_bidding_on_google_adwords.html
2 http://www.google.com/tm_complaint_adwords.html

About the author
Ian Stead
After graduating from Imperial College, London in 1980, with a degree in Zoology, Ian Stead joined Rentokil PLC Pest Control Division under a graduate recruitment scheme and soon progressed to sales manager of its London West branch.

In 1995 Ian established an independent pest control company in London, which was sold in 2004. As the son of a dentist, Ian possessed some empathy with dentists and dentistry. It was with this understanding and his excellent knowledge of running a successful business that Ian joined Frank Taylor & Associates in April 2006 as managing director.