



# The lawyer who nursed a business

*A family business in healthcare nearly crumbled when illness tore the chief away from her post. The third generation saviour has the business in fine fettle.*

**By Alan Kohler**

**Y**ou're a young lawyer, 30, just starting a career in family law in a suburban practice, when your father is diagnosed with mesothelioma and your mother walks out of the family business to look after him. What do you do? You walk out of your law career and take over the business of course.

That's what happened to Christina Widuckel six years ago. Now she's nine months pregnant with her first child and in charge of a rapidly growing, roughly \$15 million-a-year nursing agency operation, with ambitions to grow it to \$30 million-a-year and beyond. That's family business for you: sometimes the emphasis is on the word "family", not "business", although Christina Widuckel is all business now.

Her mother Rose and grandmother Catherine, both nurses, bought Colbrow Healthcare in 1968 from Dorothy Collins-Brown, who had started it in 1957. She was a nursing agency pioneer back when it was impossible to get one-on-one care in hospitals, but 11 years later she wanted to go to the country and buy a farm. Rose was one of only two nurses on the books at the time so she and her mum decided to buy it (for not very much). The business grew rapidly during the 1970s with a boom in new private hospitals; in some cases Catherine and Rose supplied all of the nursing staff to get them off the ground.

As Rose puts it "We nursed the nurses. We made sure they got the job they wanted, where they wanted. If they needed time off to look after children, they got it. It was very popular." »



**“WE NURSED THE NURSES. WE MADE SURE THEY GOT THE JOB THEY WANTED, WHERE THEY WANTED. IF THEY NEEDED TIME OFF TO LOOK AFTER CHILDREN, THEY GOT IT. IT WAS VERY POPULAR.”**

Christina, back row, second from the right, with some co-workers

By May 2007, it was just Rose who, by then, had five children of her own. She had just taken over another agency called Critical Solutions, specialising in nurses for intensive and emergency care, when her husband Hans became ill with mesothelioma, having worked at Fibremakers.

For Rose there was no question where her priority lay and she left the business to care for him (he died 12 months later). Christina stepped in. It was a traumatic time for everyone, including Colbrow Healthcare, which suddenly had a young lawyer in charge who, she says, didn't "have any tolerance for mediocrity".

Staff left and for a while the business was in turmoil as Christina worked out how to run a nursing agency. "In law, people come to you for your expertise. In business it's totally different: you have to build client relationships, do marketing."

But now: "I love the numbers. I love seeing the growth – it's so rewarding. I've always asked 'what's in the best interests of the business, not what's in the best interests of the family'". Which is an attitude that's common to most successful family businesses, along with the practice of plowing all the cash back into the business and not taking dividends, which is what Christina does.

Last year the business suddenly halved after the Federal Government cut \$100 million out of health funding and health ministers around the country were blaming each other for the mess, but according to Christina, Colbrow is back to where it was.

The fastest growing part of the business is Homecare, with more and more people looking to stay at home, in particular when they are dying – something the government is encouraging, to take pressure off hospitals.

Colbrow Medics, an events nursing and first aid operation, is owned by Christina's brother Adrian, and she recently started Colbrow Immune, which provides immunisations for companies. So despite some rocky patches along the way, this is now a solid, third generation family business. And the fourth generation? Well, she's due any day. ■