

## INVESTORS IN PEOPLE CASE STUDY:



## ST HELEN'S DENTAL PRACTICE

### **Background**

Size: 19 people

Sector: Health

Location: Cockermouth, Cumbria

Status: Achieved Investors in People Standard in 1999; working towards the Work Life Balance Model

### **Overall impact**

“Investors in People has changed the practice hugely. Our working processes and training have become more structured and formalised. Our performance has been turned around - we're now far more efficient, cohesive and organised.”

*Meredyth Bell MBE, Principal Dental Surgeon*

### **The organisation**

The St Helen's Dental practice provides dental care for the community of Cockermouth, a market town based in Cumbria on the edge of the Lake District. Established in 1984, it is primarily a private dental practice offering Denplan or private care for adults but extends NHS treatment to children, including those with special needs.

The 19-strong team of four dentists, four hygienists, a practice manager, three receptionists, a dental health educator and six dental nurses delivers a comprehensive range of services. As well as routine conservation work, St Helen's offers cosmetic dentistry and conservation under sedation. There is also a visiting surgical dentist.

Practice growth and development is at the core of its philosophy. Its aim is to provide the highest standard of oral health care, in an environment that is caring, friendly and safe. To this end, all members of the dental team are committed to on-going training and development, ensuring where possible that the most up to date proven techniques are employed in the care of patients.

Team building and audit also feature highly as a priority. This commitment to continual self improvement was acknowledged with the practice being awarded the Standard in February 1999. This team spirit shows through with staff getting involved in things such as dressing up as pirates to raise money for the dental charity Dentaaid and supporting national events such as No Smoking Day, Mouth Cancer Awareness week and Smile Week. They also have an open day for the children of Mayfield Special School where they encourage the students to play at role reversal!

The practice is committed to excellence and has gained the British Dental Association's Good Practice Award, recognising its achievements and commitment to excellence in dental practice and patient care.

### **The challenge**

Principal Dental Surgeon Meredyth Bell's overall goal for the practice was to provide the best oral health care in the locality within a caring, friendly environment. Her aim was to do this by implementing a workable but inspiring business strategy and through maintaining a positive business approach.

As part of this strategy, Meredyth was aware that the practice needed to put in place professional and structured business processes. These processes would not only apply to day to day communication but also had to address a need for greater commitment to staff development and training.

Meredyth explains, "Our working environment had become very ad hoc in nature. The practice was driven by myself and lacked any formal processes. As result, we did not make time to have regular meetings, our staff weren't regularly appraised, nor did we have a structured training programme. I was acutely aware that this had to change if the goals that I had set for the practice were to be reached."

External factors also contributed to this desire for change. For example, new rules of clinical governance handed down from the Department of Health and the Primary Care Trusts were encouraging the adoption of best practice. This increased the urgency and importance of formalising processes. Meredyth adds, "Previously there was no firm requirement for this, but now compliance is a must."

Meredyth considered her options and decided that working towards the Investors in People Standard would improve the output of her team and result in a better service to patients. At the same time the Standard would enable the Practice to adopt formal processes to meet these goals.

Meredyth concluded that it was also a good opportunity to analyse the performance of the practice: "It made me look at the business side of the practice and close analysis proved that it would be possible to combine increased training with a higher standard of patient care, without losing income."

## **The strategy**

Meredyth started by constructing a new business plan for the overall future direction of the practice. As part of this plan the practice's mission statement was defined and articulated, affirming its commitment to patient care and ongoing staff development. Communications were to be improved with at least one staff meeting to take place every month. Staff meetings would be minuted to show that people's views were being taken seriously. Practice training away days were also put in place. These sessions would encourage staff to bond, while allowing them to freely brainstorm ideas to improve the practice. Staff would also be given the opportunity to provide feedback via a suggestion box. A regular quarterly newsletter was also planned. Written by Meredyth it would be aimed at keeping staff and patients informed about developments within the practice and broader developments in dental patient care.

Whilst new starters at the practice would previously be provided with ad hoc on the job training, they would now also benefit from a special induction process to help settle them into the surgery. This process would ensure that new joiners understood essential systems and processes. At the same time, they would be given the opportunity to absorb information about the culture and values of the practice as outlined in its mission statement.

Appreciating that a renewed approach was required for staff development, Meredyth introduced measures to give staff more control over their career. "Our staff needed guidance and clear pathways for their careers," Meredyth says. "We saw it as our responsibility to empower our staff in this regard. Not only would this enhance their own personal career development, it would also be beneficial to the practice as a whole. We were keen for everyone to train. Our trainee nurses in particular, are encouraged to take NVQs in customer care."

In support of the focus on staff development, everyone at the practice was provided with a file to chart and track their own personal development. Meredyth also introduced a system of formalised appraisals, allowing two-way dialogue on staff development for all of her team.

## **Results**

Meredyth has witnessed a huge change in the practice since it achieved the Standard. Its reputation has soared, not only as a provider of high quality patient care and dentistry, but also as practice which trains its people to a high standard.

Meredyth comments, "The quality of our training programme, based around the principles of the Standard, has seen benefits for both the practice and our staff. While we never like to see people move on, we know that the training they gain here is second to none. We can say this because other employers rarely ask for a reference if they're hiring someone from our practice, it's simply enough to know that they've been trained here."

This also works in our favour when we're looking for new staff, because we rarely experience any difficulties attracting new people."

Since the practice began its formalised training scheme, the quality of patient care has gone up dramatically. This in turn has resulted in patients staying loyal to the practice. Morale among the people working in the practice has also improved significantly and staff attendance levels are described by Meredyth as 'good'.

"The surgery now has a happy relaxed environment which has been very good for business," she concludes. "Staff communication is better than it's ever been and our training programme is the envy of the area. We don't intend to rest on our achievements and fully embrace the Standard's philosophy of continual improvement. With this in mind we are engaged in sharing our experiences with other practices, so that they can learn from our best practice and we too can discover new ways of improving."