

CASE STUDY

Antley Villa Dental Practice, Accrington

BACKGROUND

When Philip Baron first qualified as a dentist back in 1981, he had a burning desire to serve the community in which he lived.

Initially he joined the practice of well respected dentist Geoffrey Garnett, who eventually became president and chairman of the BDA. He became a partner with Geoffrey Garnett in 1982. In 1988 an opportunity arose for Philip to own his practice, in Accrington, Lancashire.

Having gained experience, he was to develop this single handed NHS practice into the largest practice in Accrington with five surgeries and a 25,000-strong data base, with 10,000 registered adults and 2,500 registered children.

He and his team were incredibly busy but they were left with a feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration with the NHS system. Although they were well paid for the work, they simply didn't have the time to spend with patients, such were the demands placed upon them. Far from being able to provide the service he wanted to, Philip and his team of four other dentists were working flat out to meet the rigours of the NHS list.

"We made the best of the situation that we found ourselves in but it was like a conveyor belt. We just didn't have the time to speak to patients properly about the procedures and treatments," explained Carol Baron, practice manager and Philip's wife.

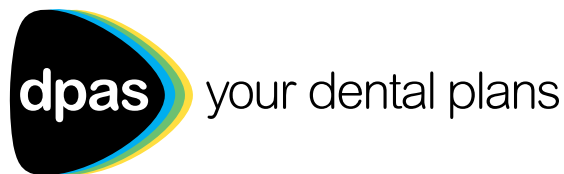
Once Philip became aware of the changes the Government was planning for the dental service, he realised he had to act swiftly to determine the best way forward for his practice. He decided he would go private in 2004 but – being such a large practice – he knew it had to be handled sensitively because so many people were involved.

"When we knew the contracts were coming in earlier than had been expected, we knew we had to make a decision fairly quickly about how we wanted the practice to run. We realised early on that a rolling conversion wouldn't work for us as there were too many patients involved and it wasn't practical to assess each one individually," commented Carol.

Following the change, around 4,100 adult patients signed on to the new payment scheme – 41% of the original number of adults they had registered on the NHS, with a further 3% opting to pay as you go. Antley Villa continued to see children on the NHS.

SOLUTION

Having looked at all the payment plans on offer, Philip and Carol chose to convert with DPAS and introduce a flat monthly fee of £10.70 per patient, in 2004. This fee covered two check-ups a year, small x-rays and a comprehensive scale with the dentist. Insurance was also included in the package and patients received a 20% discount on any further treatment.



CASE STUDY CONTINUED

ANTLEY VILLA DENTAL PRACTICE, ACCRINGTON

"We thought this was the fairest way forward for our patients and about 41% of the original registered adult list signed up. It helps us because we can budget accordingly and we do encourage all new patients to take up the payment plan," Carol said.

Working with DPAS, Carol was able to minimise any upset for patients and ensure everyone at the practice understood the changes.

Antley Villa welcomed the fact that DPAS came to the surgeries and explained to staff how the new system would work and how the payment fee was calculated. The practice found the DPAS service to be very responsive – particularly thanks to there being a dedicated Practice Consultant who works closely with the practice throughout the entire conversion process and beyond.

"DPAS is great to work with because I know I can always get hold of them – I'm not left hanging on the phone. And I have someone who is assigned to the practice so they know us really well and we know them," explained Carol.

Keeping their patients informed every step of the way has been important for Antley Villa. The practice sends out regular newsletters and has invested heavily in its website to ensure it is easy to use and has all the information a patient might need.

Every new patient receives a welcome letter – and even if a patient decided to opt out and go to an NHS practice, Carol sends them a letter to assure them they will always be welcomed back if they want to return.

BENEFITS

Leaving the NHS meant Antley Villa could reassess how it treated its patients and become far more customer-focused.

The change saw a major investment in new technology and the type of treatments that could be offered.

"Under the old system we had to do things really quickly. Now we have the time to devote to patients and the dentists are much happier. They are finally doing the job they went into dentistry to do in the first place," Carol said.

Under the NHS, Antley Villa dentists would spend just 15-20 minutes telling a patient what would happen if they fitted a crown or bridge. Now at the very least they spend an hour, explaining and showing the patient exactly what is involved in the procedure and what they can expect.

A further development has been the ability for Antley Villa to offer cosmetic procedures such as 'Smile Make Overs' – the latest technology is on order to offer an instant pearly smile – and the practice fits only the best quality crowns and veneers.

CASE STUDY CONTINUED

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Since the changeover, Carol's practice has invested thousands of pounds in the latest technology and treatments – each year they invest at least £15,000 in upgrading the facilities for patients. Air-conditioning was put in recently, and the reception areas are currently being revamped. The single biggest investment, however, was in software. Computer monitors have been installed on all the chairs so patients are able to watch on screen exactly what is happening in their mouths.

Providing great customer service is now the responsibility of everyone working at the practice. From answering the phone to ensuring their patients have the best emergency cover provided in the simplest format, Carol and her team have tried to think of everything they can to please their patients.

When it came to emergency out-of-hours treatment, Antley Villa did not want its patients to have to rely on NHS Direct. The practice is on a rota with other surgeries providing weekend and bank holiday cover and patients don't have to worry about paying on the day.

“We spoke to DPAS about how we could best organise this part of our service for our patients and they came up with the perfect solution. If our patients see another dentist who is part of the rota, they sign a form and the dentist sends that to DPAS and the treating dentist is reimbursed,” Carol said.

Overall, the benefits DPAS has brought for patients mean they get to see the same dentist on every visit and more time is spent giving them the best possible care. They have more options for treatment and can feel fully involved in the process.

As for the benefits for the practice, Carol said she would advise any other dentist considering conversion to make the move sooner rather than later.

“Go for it – it really is worth it. You shouldn't go into it thinking you will make any more money, that's not what this is about. You need to invest in your practice and your patient information – it's all about investing and planning. This has been the best decision we have ever made, but it is not easy, you have to continually work on upgrading and investing, and marketing yourself in a business environment.

You can no-longer sit back and expect the patients to come to you, they have to have a reason for choosing to come to you” Carol concluded.

To find out more about how DPAS can help smooth your journey from NHS to private practice, or to see how we can make your existing payment plan administration work more efficiently, please call us on 01747 870910 or visit us at www.dpas.co.uk.