

# A new lease of life



It's not enough to simply introduce a new practice-branded payment plan, your team must work together to sell it to patients. **Jean Smith** explains how team work at Integrated Dental Care enabled them to succeed

As a general, family practice in Edinburgh, Integrated Dental Care has used the economic slowdown of the last 18 months to breathe new life into the payment plan they first introduced in 2007. Having previously been with a competitor provider, they had long been advocates of the payment plan model and recognised all the benefits that working in this way could bring, in terms of enhanced cash flow, predictability of income, patient attendance and improved oral health, to name but a few.

## Lost

However, once their DPAS practice-branded plan was in place, there was little proactive work undertaken by the

team to promote it to existing or new patients. Slowly the benefits of the plan became lost among the day-to-day operations and higher priorities facing them. It was only in early 2010, when the chilly winds of economic slowdown started to bite, that practice manager, Jean Smith, and partners, Huw Martin-Jones and Neeraj Puri, started to notice gaps appearing in their forward appointment book. They became aware that routine hygiene appointments were also suffering and made the decision to turn their attention to their payment plan and the opportunities it could offer the practice.

Jean remembers the situation well: 'We noticed that patients would come for a check up but then wouldn't take

up the option of a hygiene visit, this was unusual behaviour for our patients and obviously due to external factors. We needed a mechanism to help encourage regular attendance and our payment plan seemed the ideal solution.'

### Relaunch

The practice had always maintained a good relationship with DPAS but had not made full use of their promotional expertise. Having made the decision to relaunch the plan, they arranged for DPAS practice consultant, Deborah Bell, to visit, discuss their needs and help execute a relaunch strategy.

Team work is one of the key success factors for a payment plan and it relies on the co-operation of all members of the in-practice team. Deborah's input helped to galvanise the team's effort and, through a combination of training, discussions and overcoming objections, they were able to create a common platform that secured the buy-in of every member of staff.

Deborah was able to bring knowledge and expertise to the project and worked with Jean and both partners to re-work the existing plan and establish a new fee structure throughout the practice. They realised there was not enough differential between joining the plan and remaining a fee-per-item patient and through the reassessment of fees they made their maintenance plan much more appealing. The plan now comprises two check-ups, two hygienist visits, any small X-rays and entitles the plan member to a 10% discount on any further treatment they require.

### Attractive

DPAS provided brochures and practice posters to build awareness of the plan and to act as a communication aid for team members. Deborah also encouraged Jean to set targets for the team in terms of getting patients on plan and their first year target was set at 200 new patients.

'When a new patient attends for an initial consultation, they always have a hygiene visit at the same time. When the plan benefits are explained to them – and they realise their visit to the hygienist can be part of the plan –

*"Having achieved a level of success, the team has the confidence to promote the plan at every opportunity"*

they consider that they are getting this visit "free" and the vast majority sign up immediately,' explained Jean.

In addition, patients don't have to be considered dentally fit to join the plan so, for some, the 10% discount on additional treatment is a very attractive offer as they can see this will save them a considerable amount of money in the future.

### Motivated

This targeted and determined focus on gaining new plan members has motivated the team, bringing them closer together around a common goal.

### Strategy

- Team work – a combination of training, discussions and overcoming objections enabled the team to create a common platform
- Deborah worked with Jean and both partners to re-work the existing plan and establish a new fee structure
- Brochures and practice posters built awareness of the plan and acted as a communication aid for team members
- Targets were set for the team in terms of getting patients on the plan.

Having achieved a level of success, the team has the confidence to promote the plan at every opportunity.

They now highlight those patients who are visiting the practice each day and as part of their regular briefing, note whether the patient is a plan member or has been previously offered the opportunity to join. Jean is convinced that their plan is helping to build patient loyalty: 'We already had a loyal patient base but having a practice branded payment plan makes patients feel that you are really looking after their interests, providing them with a means of budgeting for their oral care which they can then access on a regular basis and this means a lot to them.'

### Benefits

Relaunching their payment plan has brought numerous benefits to the practice. The increase in morale and motivation has been evident as well as the financial benefits and Jean acknowledges that they couldn't have done it without DPAS.

From a situation of noticing gaps in appointment books and the stirrings of concern over attendance levels, Integrated Dental Care has completely turned the situation around. It now has an increasingly solid foundation of patients 'on plan' and the new team ethos that the re-launch project has engendered leads Jean to believe that for their practice the sky's the limit.



**Jean Smith**

Is the practice manager at Integrated Dental Care. In 2008 she gained a diploma in management. She has a wealth of experience and is dedicated to the smooth running of the practice together. In her spare time she enjoys golf, running and scuba diving.