

# Taking control of business

North Yorkshire-based Bedale Dental Practice's practice manager, **Shauna Simpson**, discusses its move to the private sector

**B**EING in private practice is very much about being in control of one's own destiny, but when external factors come into play it can be difficult to remain on the straight and narrow, and in April 2006 the dental profession was victim of just such external pressure, causing something of a revolution.

The newly introduced dental contract caused upheaval and discontent for many practices and it was against this background that we decided a move to the private sector was inevitable. Adopting a payment plan seemed to be a sensible option as a method of safeguarding income and of giving my husband, practice principal Stephen Simpson, and myself, an element of control.

Having researched several providers, we decided to create our own practice-branded dental payment plan with the help of DPAS. With over 8,000 patients on our list, the decision to change to private practice was a logistical challenge, but we succeeded in converting around 5,000 patients of which some 3,500 took up the practice's payment plan. We also retained a small NHS child-only contract.

Since 2006, patient numbers have remained fairly static but in the last 18 months the value of a payment plan has once more come to the fore, as other external pressures began to have an impact on revenues. New NHS practices opening locally meant we lost those patients who found the lure of cheaper care too hard to ignore.

The timing was far from ideal as it coincided with costly extension work that we had undertaken in order to comply with HTM 01-05. The extension housed our new decontamination area, so I decided to make this a positive event by holding an official opening, during which we could re-launch our payment plan. When money gets tight, patients' priorities change, and the way I look at it, offering a payment plan gives patients the freedom to choose.

Our DPAS practice consultant, Deborah, always held regular meetings with

me, but last summer these became monthly rather than quarterly in order to help the practice re-focus on the benefits of the payment plan and understand how to get that message across to our patients, which culminated in a training session for the whole team and the re-launch of the Bedale Dental Plan.

We enclosed a flyer, designed by DPAS, in all our patient recall letters, which explained the benefits of joining the Bedale Dental Plan. That gave the entire team, from reception to chairside, a chance to open up a conversation about plans when patients attended, bolstered by a special registration offer if fee-per-item or new patients signed up at the initial consultation or next examination. This is now paying dividends as numbers on-plan are starting to increase.

The way DPAS is organised is extremely efficient and the people are very approachable. I can always talk to my personal contacts, making for much less frustrating conversations than when you are talking to a nameless person in a large call centre. All the personnel at DPAS seem to be aware of our needs and I find this sense of continuity very comforting.

The low cost of our payment plan administration means we don't receive as many extras as might be available from other providers, but we know that DPAS is highly efficient at administering our payment plan and has given us huge support over the past five years. Lots of the added extras are things I would never use, so I am happy to save money with DPAS and access other material as and when I need it. DPAS is the perfect business partner.



*Shauna (left) with the Bedale practice team*