

# 'To convert or not to convert'

**A**S THE spectre of April 2009 looms large, the question of "to convert or not to convert" is top of the hot topics list for most NHS dentists. Although many will have already decided one way or the other, for some the decision is not quite so straightforward and the issues that many dentists wrestle with are being further complicated by the economic uncertainty with which we are currently living.

Questions of attracting and retaining patients – always key concerns for those who convert – are made all the more important when seen in the context of job losses, reduction in disposable incomes and the re-ordering of financial priorities. The last thing a newly converted private practice needs is patients reducing their uptake of treatment.

So, for those on the knife edge of a decision I would like to offer a little comfort. During my 40-odd years in dentistry I have spoken to thousands of practitioners, some NHS, some private, some a mixture of both – and I have concluded that the most difficult aspect of conversion is actually making the decision!

To help I've often advised dentists to literally sit down and write a list of reasons why they think converting would be a positive move for them. Those who take the advice find it a rather cathartic process that helps to clarify their thoughts. I would also suggest doing the same with your staff members – conversion can be a stressful process and having the whole team united behind the change is vital. Take your team with you on the journey through conversion and you will find a more cohesive unit emerges at the end of the process.

Seeking the help of partner organisations who can assist with your conversion is an obvious, but often ignored area. Many companies

**ANDREW WARREN** looks at ways to answer the question 'to convert or not to convert' for practices...

clearly have a vested interest in helping smooth your path to conversion, but their help should not be dismissed. They have been through the process countless times before and will be able to pin-point the pitfalls and possibly save you making costly mistakes. Also make sure your financial projections are discussed with your accountant and bank manager to make sure you benefit from their experience.

Knowing and understanding your market is a key success factor for all businesses, not only in dentistry. For those on the verge of conversion, the ability to manage patient reaction to, and expectation of, their changed circumstances requires an insight into their needs. Conduct a brief analysis of your current patient data base; age, sex, demographics, attendance etc. Such analysis will give you a baseline to work from, help you set realistic financial targets and understand where your private practice should be positioned.

If, having conducted this analysis you are still unclear about aspects of what drives your patients, you should do the obvious thing to find out more information and ask! Nobody knows better what they want from your practice than your patients themselves.

Questionnaires often get a bad press but actually most people like to be asked their opinion and you can get a reasonable response from your clients. Identifying the successful traits of your practice will help you to focus on these when you need to attract new patients.

Throughout the conversion process, effective and consistent com-

munication with your patients is vital. There's always more than one way to say the inevitable, so keep all your communications positive and offer solutions rather than simply informing patients you are converting to private practice.

Unfortunately for those currently undertaking conversion they are doing so under some of the worst economic conditions known for almost two decades, and in this uncertain environment some kind of financial predictability is extremely welcome. Patient payment plans offer just such security and are also a welcome tool in encouraging patient loyalty.

The value of regular patient attendance, particularly for a newly converted practice, cannot be underestimated. By offering a payment plan you can encourage patients to budget for their dental care and help them maintain a good level of oral health.

It is all too easy for patients facing a bleak financial outlook to consider a one-off visit to the dentist as a costly and, if they are not in pain, unnecessary expense.

Unfortunately, this attitude is one that will lead to the type of neglect that becomes a breeding ground for disease and that in turn can lead to the need for extensive treatment in the future. ■

## About the Author

Andrew Warren has more than 40 years' experience in private dentistry and as part of the original team that set up dental payment plans more than 20 years ago, he developed a deep understanding of the challenges facing the sector. Andrew joined DPAS in 1997 and as sales director is helping to lead DPAS in support of practices introducing independent, practice branded payment plan services.

