Taking the plunge!

Briercliffe Road Dental Practice in Burnley could be considered by some as an unlikely place to find a thriving, dynamic private dental practice. Helen Powell – Practice Manager and wife of Dentist Mike Powell, explains their journey into Private Practice and how help came from an unexpected source.

The practice stopped taking adult NHS patients in March 2005, now 5 years later they are really experiencing the benefits of what, at the time, seemed to be a momentous decision. Mike’s commitment to providing high quality treatment and the booming NHS contract changes were the real driving forces behind their decision and although they knew that similar decisions were being taken by many practitioners, their location, in a less than prosperous area of North West England, made the decision to become a private practice more difficult. Up until 2005, their patient base had grown steadily, as they had picked up patients from practices around them who had taken the private road years before and they were worried that their decision would result in a loss of patients. In fact, they had one of the most successful single handed Denplan conversions ever, with over 1,000 of their patients becoming enrolled in one way or another. Mike and Helen had a visit from Steve Gates, Denplan’s MD and were asked to talk on several occasions to groups of dentists considering a Denplan conversion.

Since converting to private practice they have received a great deal of help in establishing and driving their business forward and at the forefront of much of their endeavours was help which came from what some may see as an unexpected source.

Alistair Newsham – who Mike and Helen had known for many years, came to see them in the middle of 2005. He had recently been taken on by Henry Schein Minerva in the role of Business Consultant and came to tell them about his new role and how it might be of interest to them. Naturally, having known and trusted Alistair for a number of years Mike and Helen were keen to explore any ways in which they could add to their now steadily growing private practice. Alistair explained to them that Henry Schein Minerva’s philosophy was to help practitioners maximise profitability by helping them to run successful businesses. A philosophy that encourages those running the practice to look at the “bigger picture” and not get too obsessed with comparing the relative costs of a box of gloves!

From the outset, Alistair encouraged them to think about where they wanted their practice to be in the future and helped them to pinpoint where they could improve productivity and efficiency. Most of the ideas Alistair put forward would be straightforward for most large, established businesses, but for a small business like Mike and Helen’s it was nothing short of a revelation.

They have incorporated a number of marketing ideas, mostly based on the advice given by Alistair and their marketing now extends to almost every area of the practice. Some activities are naturally more costly than others, but they all contribute to the growth of new patients and the delivery of excellent service and treatments to their existing ones.

Staff training is a vital element in effective marketing and when Mike and Helen decided that a dedicated Treatment Co-ordinator would be a good addition to their practice, Henry Schein Minerva arranged for another of their Consultants to visit the practice from Scotland. Gillian spent time with Mike and Helen explaining the role of Treatment Co-ordinator and how they could make this work in their practice. This role is still in its early stages but Mike has already seen the benefits of having someone else to assist the patient in treatment choices.

Since their conversion to private practice and through the undoubted help of Alistair and the team at Henry Schein Minerva, Helen has reassessed how she spends her time. Since 2005, and as they gained more confidence, Mike and Helen have followed a series of business programmes that they are certain have contributed to their success. In 2005, they achieved Investors in People, BDA Good Practice Award and completed their hat trick with the Denplan Excel accreditation, awarded in May 2005. As a team, Mike and Helen feel it is important to measure themselves regularly against these external standards, ensuring they are the best they can possibly be.

Of course time does not stand still and Mike and Helen continue to be pushed and prodded by Alistair, with the backing of Henry Schein Minerva, to set objectives and achieve more for the benefit of their patients. “Our immediate goals for the practice are to make sure we make much better use of our intra-oral camera; equipment we have had for over 5 years! Alistair has given us the idea of doing "mouth tours", to encourage patients to take more responsibility for their oral health and to ask patients what improvements they would like to see. We are also exploring the sale of Oral Hygiene products in practice and how we can maximise the potential of this part of our service.”

The decision to go private is not an easy one, it is very hard work, but it was definitely the right one for Mike and Helen and although times are changing and they know they will lose a percentage of their patients as some new NHS practices spring up around them, they are quietly confident that discerning patients will see the benefits they have to offer. “Our practice is busy and Mike has no desire to be more than a single handed practitioner, so for us, success is built around having a great team and being able to provide high quality dental treatment to motivated, enthusiastic patients in a pleasant and comfortable environment.

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“As Practice Manager I can now see the value of spending time working on aspects of the practice that will build our patient base, rather than searching through catalogues saving pennies on a couple of products. Ironically, by putting the bulk of our orders through Henry Schein Minerva we were able to negotiate extra discount anyway. Of course, we still take advantage of good value savings, but it has become much less of a driving factor for me.”