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Diversity in dentistry: Changing the narrative

Vivienne Braidwood and Katie Emberley

Co-Directors of Aesthetics, DD Group

One of the things that we love about working with dentistry is that it is a healthcare service. Wherever you find a healthcare service you find people and wherever you find people you find diversity.

Now there are a few ways of looking at equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by it. The concepts, terminology, language and approach demand a new type of learning, fresh perspectives and they ask people to think more of others and often alter learnt ingrained behaviours. How we see E, D and I is opportunity. Opportunity to learn and grow and an opportunity for us to be better and inspire and support our colleagues, customers and our industry as a whole to do better and be better.

Let's take a brief look at a couple of figures related to UK dentistry.

In 2001, 14% of dentists were from a minority background.[1] In 2015, 44% of British dentistry students were from a minority background. This is the highest proportion of black and minority ethnic students in comparison to any other university course in the country. The number of British clinical academics in dentistry has doubled in the last 20 years.[2]

What we know is that diverse organisations boast greater retention, greater profits and greater innovation. Diverse teams with multiple points of view have the opportunity to truly innovate. They take ideas further, they workshop and they act as a testing group due to varied and dynamic feedback.

What we also know about diversity in the workplace is that is flourishes under the system of 'Inclusive Leadership', a practice within DD that we have implemented and seen fruitful results with.

Inclusive Leadership – Just another buzz term?

Societal developments and the impact of COVID-19 have brought into stronger focus the importance of diverse and inclusive leadership as an integral driver of effective organisational and system performance. The unprecedented challenges facing healthcare organisations call for leaders to create the cultural shift towards a truly inclusive culture that values people and delivers a tangible and positive experience for all staff and patients. Inclusive culture is one where people can be themselves, genuine in their thoughts and feelings. They feel they belong, that they are a core part of the team and the organisation.

The UK Government's diversity and inclusion strategy focuses on equal treatment and equal opportunity. It states that *'It is not right or fair that people are discriminated against because of who they are or what they believe. So we need to stop that discrimination and change behaviour. And it is not right or fair that the opportunities open to people are not based on their ambition, ability or hard work, but on who their parents are or where they live. So we need to break down the barriers that hold people back and give them the opportunities to succeed'.*[3]

The government is the UK's most inclusive employer so there is a lot we can learn from this sector in terms of putting into practice The Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality

Act 2010 (UK) alongside goals of The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC UK).

Any kind of inclusive practice that attempts to eliminate conscious or unconscious exclusion requires effort, time and most importantly standing in the commitment to lead more inclusively. The mention of unconscious bias and exclusionary behaviours often bring a lot of heat to the conversation as they are frequently met with denial and frustration. In order to move learning further along we refer to the term 'intentional inclusion'. It is remarkable how it can shift the atmosphere of the conversation. It sparks interest, it invites curiosity, it focusses on the positives, and it serves as the basis for how we operate with the members of our team and how we communicate with our customers.

Work within EDI – Our own stories

Colleagues and friends for 17 years, we have a have a passion for, and our own personal journeys with matters relating to EDI. We share much in common and have experienced, racism, sexism, discrimination and exclusion. We both have siblings with complex disabilities whom we care for and have witnessed first-hand how those with difference are excluded by society. We have also established and run our own businesses within Central London and faced very real challenges in cutthroat industries. As EDI is part of the very fabric of who we are, it is the basis of our passions and desires for greater understanding and acceptance of difference. It has been such a driver for us that we worked as a consulting duo in the field servicing international and multi-million pound revenue clients.

We took the concept out to key people within dentistry.

The dental sector is continuing to seek new solutions on how to operate more effectively and increase the motivation and resilience of dental professionals. It therefore made sense to take this concept out to key people within the DD dental community.

We have a vision to awaken, inform and inspire people to have authentic conversations about EDI. Wanting to have a positive impact within DD and its client base, a series of one-to-one sessions and workshops were established – the objective being to arm individuals with a greater understanding, respect and compassion for others that translates into a more unified, balanced, positive and productive working culture.

How important is EDI is within dentistry?

The key themes coming out of the workshops were:

1. The trap of having a tendency of familiarity. If we keep doing the same thing, we experience the same results. Those we spoke to explored ways in which they could flex their leadership style to include all and the many benefits this provides. Improved self-awareness allowed them to consider how each individual or situation may require a different lens through which to view and progress it.
2. Communicating to teams with varying language backgrounds and communication styles and identifying the different needs within groups of people. One size does not fit all, and the first step is accepting diversity within communication. It can be as simple as asking and not assuming, or actively listening with an empathetic ear. This component is very much driven by breaking with the familiar.
3. To extract the very best from staff members in a compassionate and engaged manner is inclusive leadership in practice.
4. Enrolling those impacted by the decisions into the decision-making process provides a unique opportunity to recruit diverse opinions and ideas. This ensures these decisions are inclusive, receive buy-in from key stakeholders such as patients, staff and align with the dental practice's long term plans.
5. Challenging and uncomfortable conversations are essential as we move through the transition to Inclusive leadership. Inclusive leaders work hard to dissolve the heat and fear around having challenging and difficult conversations by doing so with compassion in the knowledge that they won't always get it right. This is how they and their people learn how to get more comfortable with the uncomfortable.

How to incorporate within your practice

Evidence suggests that organisations that foster authentic equality, diversity and inclusion in practice boast greater performance in all areas then their less diverse counterparts. These include, but are not exhaustive to:

→ Teams that are higher performing, more engaged and more innovative. Enhanced well-being and job satisfaction[4]
→ Improved employee engagement and retention amongst all groups of people[4]
→ A recent study suggests that increasing the diversity of leadership teams leads to more and better innovation and improved financial performance/profits. Better decisions and more creative solutions (if people feel they can speak up).[5]

Dental practices and teams with effective EDI practices can benefit from the above. In addition, those in the bottom quartile for both gender and ethnic/cultural diversity are 29% less likely to achieve above-average profitability than were all other companies in the McKinsey report data set.[6] In short, not only were they not leading, but they were also lagging. As more organisations become aware of this evidence the identified need for Inclusion and Diversity training will amplify.

What we love about UK dentistry is the thirst for knowledge, the ambition for the quest to continually improve best practice for patients and business. It is why the discussion around Inclusive leadership is so integral to our industry. Dental clinicians as a profession are best placed to grab this concept with both hands. The dental demographic evidences the greatest diversity in modern graduates, and it services *all* sectors of patients. We are committed to standing in the space for continued growth and understanding of inclusivity and invite all of our industry colleagues and customers to do the same. ◆

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