Was it worth it?

Can we blend the requirements of professional self-regulation with the effective use of practice time in continuing professional development?

Recently I was with a group of practitioners who were all complaining that a postgraduate day course they had attended had been a total waste of time. What really annoyed them was the fact that the day had been mandatory (and they had had to pay a fee as well). Not only that, but the content of the day had covered areas they felt were not as relevant to their practice or themselves as other potential topics.

The problem was that the practitioners understood the concept that forms an important basis to Investors in People (IiP) which is that cost-effective training for any organisation should be relevant to helping the individuals in that organisation improve their knowledge and ability at doing their jobs. Surely this is the basis for all postgraduate education, especially as we move closer to mandatory recertification? The question is; can we blend the requirements of professional self-regulation with the effective use of practice time in continuing professional development?

There are really two issues here. The first is that practitioners should select training for themselves and the others in their practices based on the individual needs of everyone in the practice and the individual priorities and objectives of the practice. Thus a dental practice that needs to attract more patients or perhaps attract a different group of patients (because it has introduced a new service such as an orthodontic specialist or implants) has a major need for marketing skills and knowledge, even if the practice is engaging a consultant to help it. If someone in the practice is already knowledgeable and skilled in marketing then there is no training need. If no-one in the practice is competent and knowledgeable in marketing, a training needs exists. If the need is urgent then it makes good sense to spend part of the training budget fulfilling the need rather than attending an updating clinical course in an area the dentist is already competent and confident.

The second issue is the practice of making specific training mandatory, especially when that training covers areas that are not essential for the participants. I can understand the sense in a group that is about to parachute behind enemy lines requiring training in parachuting, or for a group of potential trainers in vocational training learning how to coach their VDPs, but I fail to see why any dentist should be forced to attend a day updating clinical knowledge if that dentist is already up-to-date. Surely it is far more sensible to identify the training needs of the individual (which is what everyone who achieves IiP does as a matter of routine) and then ensure appropriate training is provided to satisfy the individual needs. Thus the mandatory bit (if we have to have it) should cover the systems for identifying training needs and ensuring they are both satisfied and evaluated, by whatever means are most effective for the practices and individuals involved?

This does not mean that organising a postgraduate day in clinical updates is a waste of time, far from it. Ensuring that people in the practice keep up to date is vital and an important part of continuing professional development. For many practitioners a training needs analysis will identify clinical areas that require updating, and one way of achieving that is a day course. As long as the updating course helps the practitioner achieve the objectives of the practice and satisfies a genuine training need then it all makes good business sense.

As I stated above, the final step is to evaluate the results of any training (not the process of carrying it out). What those running the practice (as well as those providing the training) need to know is whether the training day actually satisfied the objectives of those attending, and whether they have changed anything as a result. But that, as they say, is another story.

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