Focus Awards 2001

L Voisey

In the first of a series of five articles we will be looking at each of the practice finalists from the Focus Awards 2001, starting with the winners, Woodlands Dental Practice in Liverpool.

The reward for best overall innovations in improving patients' experiences from first-contact through to clinical treatment went to Woodlands Dental Practice, a PDS practice in Rock Ferry, Wirral. So what made them so special..?

Putting the customer first

Every call is important at this practice, which is why three new phone lines were installed to prevent engaged calls when patients call. The practice recently recruited extra reception staff, and they have all been on a customer care course.

The practice policy of handling emergency appointments also impressed the judges. Practice owner Philip Ratcliffe says that every morning two hours is set aside for emergency patients and the appointment cannot be booked before 8.30 am on that day. There are five dentists in the practice and a rota system is in place so that each day a different dentist treats emergencies. Understanding that emergency

The team at Woodlands Dental Practice.

patients tend to be very nervous, each patient is allocated a time and effort is made to ensure they are seen on time. For after-hour emergencies, there is a 24 hour bleep number for patients in trouble – another system rotated between dentists.

Communication with patients is made a priority. Patients are posted recall appointments and this gets over the patients' initial reluctance to pick up the phone as the appointment is already made, and they are not charged if they do not turn up. A local school is working with the practice on designing a web-site and e-mail facility for arranging appointments.

Enhancing patients experience

The practice itself was newly built within the grounds of an old building last year and they moved into the establishment in July 2000. There is disabled access, toilets, a 'confidential' section of the reception area and a children's play area. The children's play area has toys and educational information with tips, for instance, on good and bad things to eat.

There is a high commitment to staff training for all, and staff are encouraged to attend customer care courses and recognise signs of child abuse. A CDS dental practitioner is now available on site for two separate afternoons – he holds 30 minute appointments and carries out sedation

where necessary. This allows patients with special needs and phobic or nervous patients to be treated within the family practice. A special preventative dental unit has been set up on site for children where they can, for instance, be shown how to clean their teeth. A dental therapist and two hygienists working in the preventative unit have devised a specific care package for children with high needs.

Plans for the future

Philip Ratcliffe says the practice will continue to encourage further training with dentists and staff. This year, one of the nurses plans to enrol on a hygienist course while another hopes to embark on a therapist course. The practice is also encouraging would-be dentists. As part of a teaching initiative, the practice has three final year dental students treating patients all day on Friday's. Other plans include participation in the BDA's 'Good Practice' and 'Investors in People' schemes. Winning the Focus Award has been a great boost to the practice, says Philip Ratcliffe. 'All the staff were delighted with the award and made a brochure of the pictures and press cuttings. They each got a £100 bonus and we donated £1000 to local charities.'

Please call the BDA on 020 7563 4563 for information about applying for this year's Focus Awards.

Children learn the benefits of oral health early on!

Disabled access for patients is a plus.