Why environmental sustainability

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It is thought climate change is already a matter of life and death for many regions of the world. Sir David Attenborough has said we face ‘irreversible damage to the natural world and the collapse of our societies’. A sombre thought. But there is hope – if we all do what we can to help!

It would be fair to say the past year has not been one where it has been possible for dental practices to meet their aim of improving their impact on the environment – as in reducing energy and water consumption and waste production. COVID-19 has had a considerable effect on environmental sustainability from both an energy and pollution (especially irresponsibly discarded face masks) point of view, here in the UK and indeed world-wide, because of the greatly increased demand for single use PPE and other infection prevention and control products and associated resources.

Practices have had to increase their energy usage due to more frequent cleaning and

disinfecting and the need for improved ventilation throughout. Additional cleaning and disinfecting chemical products (hand sanitisers, surface cleaners and disinfectants) have been required and there have been a lot more single use plastic consumables and PPE to dispose of.

It could be easy to think along the lines of ‘what is the point?’ of trying to make savings in energy and water usage and reducing waste after what has and is continuing to happen, but it is important for us all to stay focused on the challenge ahead and continue to improve wherever it is possible.

Your practice may be small, or medium, or large, but whatever size it is and however many team members you have, your contribution really will help.

Why having a policy is important

In short, it outlines your practice’s commitment to conserving natural resources and minimising pollution from the work you do. It should cover your plans to ensure energy efficiency, water efficiency and waste reduction. Your written policy need not be too long – up to one side of A4 is enough.

You should include the name of the person to be contacted if anyone has any queries about the policy.

It should be signed and dated by the practice owner/employing dentist. You should state that you will review the policy annually to make sure it is still relevant and include the review date as a reminder.

Once you are happy with your policy make it available to all team members. You could put it on your website, in your reception area and include it in marketing materials and tenders.

Of course, it is one thing to write and display a policy statement and another thing to ensure you continue to work towards improving on energy and water consumption and reducing waste, so it may be helpful to include this topic in your regular practice meetings and whenever you are considering the purchase of new equipment or products.

Is there anything else you can do?

Yes, ending on a more cheerful note, if the practice has any outside or garden space, you could encourage bees and other beneficial pollinating insects by allowing ‘lawn weeds’ such as clover and dandelions to grow and/or sow pollinator-friendly native wildflower seeds such as the common or field (red) poppy – on warm sunny days the bees will be very busy and will love you for it!

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What the BDA is doing to help

The BDA is taking the lead on the issue of sustainability in dentistry across the UK. We are working with key stakeholders to develop policy, and we are supporting dental practices to overcome the barriers to becoming more sustainable. You can read more about what we are doing at <https://bda.org/about-the-bda/campaigns/sustainable/Pages/Sustainability-in-dentistry.aspx>

Environmental sustainability policy – example template

Mission statement

[The Dental Practice] recognises that it has a responsibility to environmental sustainability beyond legal and regulatory requirements. We are committed to reducing our environmental impact and continually improving our environmental performance.

Responsibility

[Name and Title] is responsible for ensuring this policy is implemented. However, all team members have a responsibility in their area to ensure that the aims of the policy are met.

This policy aims to:

- Comply with all relevant regulatory requirements

- Continually monitor to improve environmental performance and reduce our impact
- Incorporate environmental factors into practice decisions
- Increase team awareness and training.

Paper, energy and water

- We will minimise the use of paper and reuse and recycle it where possible
- Lights and electrical equipment will be switched off when not in use and where practical
- Heating and cooling will be adjusted with energy consumption in mind.

Practice equipment and supplies

- We will consider the environmental impact of any new equipment and products before purchasing
- We will favour environmentally friendly and efficient products wherever possible
- We will reuse and recycle everything we are able to.

Transport

- We will promote the use of travel alternatives such as e-mail or video/phone conferencing
- We will do what we can to encourage travel by public transport and/or bicycle.

Maintenance and cleaning

- Cleaning materials used will be as environmentally-friendly as possible
- Materials used in practice refurbishment will be as environmentally-friendly as possible.

Monitoring and improvement

- We will continually monitor to reduce any environmental impact
- We will incorporate environmental factors into practice decisions
- We will increase employee awareness through training.

Culture

- We will involve team members in the implementation of this policy
- We will update it annually in consultation with team members and others where necessary
- We will provide team members with relevant training.

Signed
 Position Practice Owner/Employing Dentist
 Date
 Next review date
 (at least annually)

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