If you are ill or absent from your practice, how do you keep it running remotely?

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Practice owners may be absent from their dental practice for many different reasons, from maternity leave to long term sickness or career breaks. Although their dental work may cease and their daily activities change dramatically, their responsibilities as practice owners, in respect of both NHS and private businesses, remain. Practice owners are still responsible for the finances of the practice, staffing matters and compliance with regulatory requirements and so you will need to keep running your practice remotely. To have a practice running in your absence the success is in the planning. Whether you are due to go on leave for a period or not, it is important to have a plan as to how the practice will be run in your absence in case you are unexpectedly absented.

What should you include in your plan?

This is by no means an exhaustive list but below are some ideas of what you can include. You should discuss your plan with co-owners and anyone else who is involved with the management of the practice to ensure you have covered all bases and they are happy with the arrangements. Remember they may well be the ones filling in for you in your absence.

Timing

The length of time of your absence will impact your plan. If you are taking a two-week holiday then a more informal plan will be needed than if you are taking a six month

career break or a period of time following an operation. Have separate plans *in situ* for different circumstances. Label the plans to make them distinctive 'Short term leave' and 'longer term unplanned absence'. Where you have a planned longer absence, you can draft up a separate plan for that absence. The key to your practice running happily and successfully is planning and making sure the staff and personnel know where the appropriate plan is stored.

Contact

Where the leave is planned it is very important that those taking care of your business know how to contact you but also know how contactable you will be. For instance, if you are going to a remote island with no signal and intermittent wi-fi your team need to know this and need to have it clearly set out what decisions they can and cannot make without you. It may be that you can delegate some decision making such as overtime or stocking that would otherwise fall with you to your team in advance if this is sensible. You should also set out explicitly what you require them to speak to you about before committing to. What are the expectations regarding complaints, for example. Do you want to nominate another practitioner to oversee these in your absence or do you wish to be contacted in the event these arise?

Depending on the size of your practice, you may be happy with everyone being able to contact you whilst you are away, or you may prefer this to be limited to a few senior team members so you can attempt a proper break. If you are away for two weeks you may encourage your team to manage things in your absence and leave non-urgent matters that need your attention until you are back. However, if you are on a career break or

maternity leave instead you should plan an hour or more a week or every few days where you check in with your team to see how things are going and make decisions together. Remember if you are away for any length of time it is important that you are still running the business. Do not rely on your team in so far as you will remain responsible for their actions so make sure you know what is going on. It may be prudent to check in with all your staff if you have a reasonable sized practice as opposed to just your top team to gain a holistic view of what is going on.

Your duties

To help you build your plan, start by making a list of what you do:

1. Each day
2. Each week
3. Each month
4. Each year.

Do this methodically day by day and you will start to see what you can delegate and what you cannot. You will also see what needs to be done immediately and what can wait. This will help you plan for short term and long-term absences as well as unexpected absences.

COVID-19 times

During the pandemic unplanned absences from practices, both short and longer term, are becoming expected. With no real way to know how long the pandemic will last it is a good idea to get plans in place. Talk to your team and plan for your absence and how you will keep in touch with the practice as well as planning for the absences of other key players in your business. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. ♦

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