day in the life

MODERN MANAGERS

As dental practice management becomes a recognised career, **Kate Maynard** talks to two practice managers who have risen to the top of their fields.

Emma John is an award-winning manager, and it's not difficult to see why. From dental nurse to RAF practice manager, mother of three to manager of nine, her continued passion for the industry has seen her embrace the rapidly evolving role of dental practice manager.

Emma (below) gained the recognition of her peers when she was awarded the BDPMA's Practice Manager of the Year award for 2003. The judges believed her to be the embodiment of a modern dental practice manager, combining positive determination and dedication with a genuine passion for dentistry. Adding to this, Emma feels that being open-minded is vital to the job, as she says 'the whole system of dentistry is changing so rapidly and the role of dental practice manager in particular is evolving faster than perhaps anything else, so it is important to be prepared for this and keep abreast of all the changes'.

Dental practice managers today often, like Emma, work their way up from being a dental nurse. Emma went from a week's work experience at school to dental nursing in Somerset and dental nurse training in the RAF. She rapidly rose through the ranks to become a very young dental practice manager in the RAF at that time. Although some managers enter the field from a business management background, Emma feels that her past experience helps her to relate

better to her team. This is a real advantage to the training aspect of her job, particularly when it comes to assisting dental nurses with any problems they might be having.

A typically busy day at the practice starts for Emma at 8.30am, when she goes from managing her young family at home - with three young children aged four, seven and ten - to managing a dental team of nine, comprising three dentists, two hygienists, three nurses and an assistant manager - two of whom are recent additions to the expanding Anchor Dental team. Emma believes the key to a successful team is having an open practice with a fair, calm and approachable manager, where every member of the team knows their objectives and what is expected of them - including the dentists - and who to turn to if a problem needs to be addressed.

Efficient day-to-day running of the dental practice clearly calls for strong working relationships between the manager, the team, and the patients. Dentists may traditionally have been the 'head' of the practice, but luckily Emma has encountered few that aren't happy to concentrate on clinical issues and leave management to her. If she does encounter any difficulties, Emma's approach is to firmly re-emphasise the practice's objectives, say 'this is what we're going to do and these are the reasons why' and usually the problem is rectified with the whole team's support behind her.

Meeting and interacting with patients is one of the favourite parts of being a dental practice manager for Emma: taking the time to chat to patients - she knows many by name - and always giving full attention to those that approach her. It can even be rewarding in that people in her position have the ability to change people's perspectives about going to the dentist. Numerous times she has had new patients attending the surgery, in pain yet dreading the dentist's chair - and at the end of a two or three month period of treatment they are praising the dental team and actually enjoying the experience.

Inevitably however, frustrated patients in pain can on rare occasions become troublesome. Some confrontation or conflict between patient and staff occurs in all surgeries from time to time. Judith Chandler, another award-winning practice manager, expresses the same view as Emma in that the

few complaints they do receive very rarely go further than the complaints procedure.

After 32 years in dentistry, Judith (above), Practice Manager at Kendrick View Dental Practice in Reading, still thrives on meeting the constant variety of people who pass through her practice and is keen to use her ample experience to offer advice on conflict resolution: 'I give the person (who is complaining) my full attention and invite them to speak to me in a quiet place away from the ears of other people; the difficult patient loves an audience!' explains Judith.

'Positive body language and a calm voice are vitally important if you are going to convince this irate person that you respect them and are taking their issue seriously.

Show you are listening, give the patient the opportunity to present their issue without interrupting them, offering excuses or blaming a third party. Once you have established the facts and clarified what it is they need you're well on your way to a satisfactory conclusion and a happier patient.'

The approach obviously works, as not only was Judith named Practice Manager of the Year 2004 at the recent Dental Awards but her team was also awarded Best Dental Support Team, an achievement of which Judith is justifiably proud. She modestly cites longevity and length of service as the reason she was chosen, and as for her team, believes their award was 'well-deserved recognition of their loyalty and dedication'. Judith also thinks her team's commitment to training and personal development contributed significantly, as all her staff are fully-qualified and have

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health and safety standards, and in some cases they have clinical duties as well. It is understandable therefore that Emma finds time management the most challenging aspect of her job. Although she appreciates being able to have flexible hours - working three days in the practice and one day from home per week (which in the past would have been five or five-and-a-half days in the practice per week) - she does find fitting everything into her schedule a challenge. Ironically, on the day she works from home she usually receives more calls and is even busier than on practice days!

regular training, the majority of which takes place in-house; Kendrick View has its own tutoring programme called 'Team Work'.

Training is an intrinsic part of any team's development and Emma emphasises the importance of all staff on reception receiving training in how to handle difficult situations. She is confident that her staff knows what to do without panicking and as such, tempers can be diffused and problems resolved swiftly.

Training in general for all staff is requisite for a modern practice; Emma explains 'everyone does CPD - it's one of those things: the changes (in dentistry) are there and

everyone has to be doing CPD to keep up: it's all for a reason'. For managers it is largely up to the individual, but Emma recently made significant changes to her management style due to attending a six-month training course, and was surprised at just how many benefits the sessions had.

As well as conflict resolution and training, skills in organisation and efficiency are intrinsic to the role of dental practice manager. DPMs' duties extend to budget management, risk management, recruitment and selection, appraisal, marketing, maintaining

This does little to sway Emma's enthusiasm; this is evident not least in her eagerness to recommend dental practice management as a career. Describing her job as 'jolly hard work' ultimately requiring dedication and commitment, Emma still finds time to indulge her other passions - horse riding, and of course being a mum! She is in no doubt that 'when you have been doing the same job nearly 20 years and still get a buzz out of it', dental practice management is a great profession.