

# Making a success out of a mixed dental practice

**THERESA RILEY** of Patient Plan Direct offers her food for thought on what it takes to run a venture that combines both private and NHS work...

While dentistry is a healthcare service, it is also ultimately a business, which is why those in practice are often striving to increase their turnover and profit. I'm often asked if this is possible while also working with an NHS contract and the answer is, resoundingly, yes it is! However, the first thing to accept is that increasing the amount of NHS care a practice offers is unlikely, so in essence the only way to grow your business is through private dentistry.

The big question is this – can you meet the needs of your NHS patients/contract and still boost your private income at the same time, without jeopardising patient care? Of course you can, but you must be prepared to make fundamental changes to your patient journey in order to maintain your NHS quality of care while also offering something different to your private patients who will want, and expect, that little bit more.

## Boost your standards

It is important to remember that while fulfilling your NHS contract, all of your patients should receive an exceptional service and experience; think of this as the gold standard. However, there are some small tweaks and changes you can apply that will provide an extra special touch for your private patients; think of this as the platinum standard.

The way I like to put this into context is to compare your patient journey to that of an Emirates flight. There are two passengers both travelling to Dubai, one wants to fly in luxury for the seven-hour flight and chose to pay £3,000 for first class, the other selects economy and pays £500. If then, both passengers waited in the same airport lounge, queued to board the plane together, had the same seats, same food and drink and left the plane together, I suspect those flying first class would be rather peeved! The same applies to your NHS and private patients.

My first piece of advice is to walk in your patient's footsteps, carry out the patient journey exactly as they would. It can be difficult to see your own practice through someone else's eyes and I would recommend carrying this out with a friend or family member who you can trust to relay the truth about the experience. Remember, only by looking through the eyes of a patient will you gain a true understanding of the ways in which you can improve your service offering. In this way you will be able to ascertain the areas of your service where you can perform subtle changes to improve the overall experience for everyone who visits, but what can you do for your private patients to enhance this even further?

## Time

One of the most precious and valuable things we all have is time, so if you can reduce any aspects where a patient may have to wait, this will always be gratefully received. With this in mind, assess your appointment availability, ensuring that you are still working within your NHS contract. However, you can offer late nights, early mornings and/or weekend appointments. It is paramount that you are strict with these times, they are only for private (independent) or plan patients, never be tempted to offer these priority times to your NHS patients as it will devalue the whole process. Also look at patient waiting times to see if there's a better way of managing them so that private patients can benefit from a quicker service.

When it comes to telephone calls, can your private patients always get through, even on a Monday morning when your phones are like the London Underground in rush hour? A question I always put to a practice is; if you needed an emergency appointment but you can never get through to speak to a receptionist would you not just call the next practice who maybe does answer the

telephone and give you an appointment without waiting? Rather than expecting them to be kept in a telephone queue, why not consider having a dedicated phone line for private patients?

Once inside the practice, are there regular queues at your reception desk, or do you have a system for private patients where they can go straight to a seat without the fear of being missed? Incorporating a self check-in system and a separate waiting room for private patients offers a luxurious and high-tech touch, making people feel like they really are experiencing something a little extra. Within this waiting area ensure it is a calming environment with complementary drinks and up-to-date magazines to read.

## Choice

Another commodity we all want in life is choice, so regularly assess the services you offer to see if they are what your patients really want. Unsure? Ask! From surveys to conversations at the chairside, there's nothing quite as informative as real patient feedback, just make sure you act upon it to boost your treatment range and, vitally, your practice turnover.

Having plenty of options for your patients means that there are more decisions for them to make, and to ensure these are informed I would advise allowing enough time at your appointments to discuss these fully. This will prevent your patients from feeling rushed through the appointment and it will also help your day run to schedule. It may be wise to consider the help of a treatment coordinator to help in this area.

Another area where you can offer extra choice is through your dental patient plans, is one dental plan enough or could your patients benefit from a range of plans to again ensure that you are offering choices? An affordable dental plan can bridge the gap between

NHS and private care, boosting take up of treatments that may have previously seemed unaffordable, such as dental implants, cosmetic orthodontics, facial aesthetics, etc. Not only does this give your patients more choice, it helps your bottom line, too.

## Be unique

As long as you ensure your patient journey is what you would expect from a private service – whether that is private dentistry, private healthcare or an Emirates flight to Dubai – there is no reason why you can't make a success of a mixed dental practice. There are plenty more ideas out there, some of which may be individual to your own business; look out for changes you can make that help to make your service stand out from the crowd. Of course, this will require some expenditure but the return on investment should more than outweigh this. There are ways of looking at saving money, one being through your plan administration. I go into many practices that work with plan providers who are charging well over £2.00/£3.00 per patient per month, are these fees value for money? Its definitely worth exploring other options, I can assure you that you will be surprised what other quality solutions are in the market at much lower cost. Savings which could go towards making some of those needed changes to ensure you are offering your independent patients what they expect from a private service. ■

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## About the author

Theresa Riley is one of the business development team at Patient Plan Direct. Theresa has over 18 years' experience within the dental industry, from nursing to teaching, mentoring and business development, with a focus on enhancing private turnover, the patient journey and nurturing strong team work.



Patient Plan Direct offers a low cost, simple, flexible and practice-branded solution to running patient payment plans, with a focus on delivering first-class support and expert advice to ensure you reach your plan objectives. For more information please visit [www.patientplandirect.com](http://www.patientplandirect.com), email [info@patientplandirect.com](mailto:info@patientplandirect.com), or call 0844 848 6888.