

# Dogs, cats and rats

JANICE CHARLTON advises using this fun analogy before implementing any big changes...

WHEN you're thinking about introducing a major change into your practice, such as adding private dentistry alongside an NHS contract, it is a good idea to analyse your existing patient base to help give you a good indicator of how things could pan out. Of course, you can never know for sure, if we could those all-important decisions would be far less fraught and anxious, wouldn't they!

However, there's a nice analogy called 'dogs, cats and rats' that I've used for years; you may well have heard of it already. Those who haven't are probably wondering what on earth I'm talking about. Well, this is a non-derogatory and fun way to analyse your patient base by splitting them into three categories, which can give you a good indication of what you're working with.

This can make a really good team exercise because it's interesting and having the input of your staff is a great way to analyse things properly. So, if you are considering implementing change consider doing this at your next team meeting, here's how to separate the three categories...

## Dog, cats and rats

Patients who we class as 'dogs' are the ones who are incredibly loyal to one dentist. Most often, these are long-term patients who recommend you and have usually brought friends and family to you too, because they think you are simply the best. You play an important role in their lives, they'll view you as a friend and these are the patients who probably bring in the shortbread and chocolates at Christmas time. Your dog patients are the ones who will wait, maybe in pain, for their dentist to have an available appointment as they just won't see anyone else.

Your 'cat' patients are similar to dogs as they show high levels of loyalty, but the difference is that this is to the practice rather than a particular dentist. You will find these patients have visited the same practice for a very long time, this may be a generational thing or it could be due to convenience of the location. You'll often find that these patients sit in same seat in waiting room, and read the same magazine titles each time because they enjoy their comfort zone. Cats will stay with your practice even if the dentist or hygienist changes, because that's where they've always gone. It would take something big to upset these patients and make them run away; but just like real cats, they often come back because they will miss being in their comfortable territory.

Your one-hit-wonder patients are your 'rats'. You'll find that these patients are not regular attenders, but instead will visit when they have a problem. To these patients, the dentist is a casual service that they don't show loyalty to and they will often shop around based on lower prices or because they are



looking for a treatment that you don't offer. Sometimes these patients have bad debt with you; they show no loyalty to either the practice or the dentist. The rat patients will be the first to run away at the idea of change.

## What are you working with?

I would advise looking at who has visited the practice over the last 24 months, as this gives a more real indication of the existing patient base and what you're likely to be working with. When considering a significant change, such as leaving the NHS to go private, you need a good indication of patient loyalty to see how likely it is that you'll retain your existing patients. Of course, with any change you can expect to see an element of patient loss, these are your rats, but the idea is to minimise this.

If only the practice principal is going private, take a look at how many dogs he or she has, as they will need a healthy number to make this scenario work. In this situation, your cats will probably move to an associate dentist. If all dentists in the practice are moving out of the NHS then you need a mixture of dogs and cats as both will keep coming back. Your rats are likely to run away to the NHS practice down the road.

## Take action

Splitting your patient base into these three categories is not a proven science but it is an easy way to get a flavour of what you're working with, giving you a good gut feeling and an indication to

go on. You have to be a bit ruthless in order to do this properly, because if you discover that your practice has too many rats you need to look at why, put a plan in place to change things, and then wait before introducing change.

In any practice, there will always be a split but if you find yourself with a low number of dogs you need to look at why you're not attracting patient loyalty. If this is the case, take look at your customer service levels and ensure the patient journey is excellent. To attract more dogs you need to become very patient centred and go the extra mile to make each patient feel special, as though they're the only one.

A practice full of rats would be an unusual scenario, if this was the case I would imagine that the practice would be an NHS walk-in centre, or a similar set up, where significant change would not be suitable. In my experience, you cannot change a patient, so don't try to make dogs out of rats, instead focus on changing who you attract and achieve loyalty that way.

I often carry this concept out with practices who are considering introducing a patient payment plan, because in order to make this a successful venture you need a good number of dogs and cats as these patients will show loyalty. At patient Plan Direct, our plans are practice branded, which is particularly great for attracting the patients who put their faith in your services, rather than asking them to sign up to a brand they don't know or trust. With our super low plan administration

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## About the Author

Janice Charlton fully understands the challenges of running a modern dental practice, she has vast practice management experience and is also a qualified dental therapist. She has supported hundreds of dentists and their teams across the UK in successfully establishing dental plans within their practices, whether offering a plan as an option to private fee per item, or considering a move out of the NHS.

