

Adapting to change

Dental Nursing talks to **Louise Butler** about how her practice's team handled the pandemic



Louise Butler is the practice manager at The Maltings Dental Practice in Grantham, Lincolnshire.



As we power forward through this era of Covid-19, new models of healthcare delivery continue to emerge. Successful patient journeys require the team to adapt effectively in order to safely navigate the ever-changing landscape that is being redrawn by the pandemic.

However, throughout this process there are a number of fundamentals that remain a constant. According to the King's Fund, there have been some key lessons to be learnt from "the biggest challenge the health and care system has faced in living memory".

Its publication, *The road to renewal: Five priorities for health and care* lists the following principles that it believes will help restore healthcare services:

- Putting the workforce centre stage
- A step change on inequalities and population health
- Lasting reform for social care
- Embedding and accelerating digital change
- Reshaping the relationship between communities and public services.



For the team at The Maltings Dental Practice in Grantham, Lincolnshire, implementing these changes is somewhat personal. At the practice's helm is Jason Wong, deputy chief dental officer (CDO) for England, so they see it as their responsibility to set the bar high.

Louise Butler is the practice manager, and she believes that, whilst these five priorities are essential, The Maltings team has always been willing to adapt to change, with every effort made to put patients and staff at the heart of its delivery.

She comments, "The position of deputy CDO for Jason simply means there is a responsibility upon all of us at The Maltings to set an example."

In March 2020, the suspension of face-to-face care for two and half months was, as it was for others, a real concern.

Louise says, "The demand for dental services during normal times can cause apprehension, so this was on a whole new level. We had to cancel more than 5,000 appointments. Our inability to provide care to patients in clinic for that time was worrying. But, during the closure, we worked hard to keep in touch with patients and staff using all the digital technology we had to hand."

One crucial aspect was signposting patients where to get help in the early months of the pandemic.

She explains, "We quickly realised that good communication was paramount for patient care, not just in our own setting but also for those around us – a vital lifeline for those people requiring urgent care."

When practices in England eventually reopened on June 8, 2020, The Maltings remarkably completed all non-AGP urgent treatments in the same week, and then addressed all AGP urgent appointments of their own patients within two weeks.

With the bond between management and staff strengthened during the pandemic's early days, Louise says, "It is at times like this that having a strong, committed, patient-focused team matters. We were able to pull together and continue providing care, albeit in alternative ways, such as over the phone or on video calls. The team also increased its hours to deliver care and triage patients.

"We felt lucky in that we have large premises, which helped us adopt and practise social distancing, and we were able to factor in the necessary downtime between appointments, too."

It is thanks to this cohesive approach that patients were seen.

"With obvious apprehensions in the early days, the team has been superb in wanting to continue to help patients. The desire to get used to a new normal was commendable. With a frequently updated standard operating procedures, we had to read, understand, process and implement any changes. Some team members had to adjust their start and finish times to help with social distancing in areas of the practice and, due to school wraparound care being ceased for a period of time, further adjustments needed to be accounted for as well."

In fact, The Maltings' 'dental family' also worked hard to ensure a continuity of care beyond the surgery.

Louise explains, "Our staff were also involved in giving back to the local community during the pressing times. With many self-isolating, elderly and vulnerable members of the public never felt more helpless, especially during the early months of the pandemic. Our dental nurses were involved in the delivery of groceries to those who needed them. We also donated essential items to the local food bank.

"We tried to keep an active presence on social media as a way of connecting and reaching out to patients and anyone else who may have needed us. We used local magazines to enhance this connection, sharing information on oral health and diet, how to look after braces and even mental health awareness tips – anything we felt important to cover."

Now, more than 18 months down the line, the team has embraced digital technology for the long term.

Louise says, "We continue to promote the fact that patients can reach us by various means and not just the telephone. Adapting to a more virtual approach is essential and we utilise our social media, website and email system to that end."

The introduction of their patient portal to complete documents prior to visiting the practice also proved to be such a huge benefit that they plan to continue with this, too.

"A more paperless approach is certainly the way forward for both ease and sustainability of the environment," Louise says. "Using the secure portal really helps with the sharing of information with patients and helps us gain feedback, which is a great two-way process."

As a GDP, and now as deputy CDO,

one of Jason's key missions is to improve communication with the frontline. For him and his team, good communication lies at the heart of dentistry at the simplest level.

Louise says, "With the ever-changing picture, good communication is key for delivering our services. We worked hard on this by following up on changes and ensuring everything was well understood as well as factoring a process to feedback. Team building has been challenging, but we've tried to keep the morale positive and have wellbeing at the forefront of our minds."

Having a versatile team helps address oral health concerns in the current landscape – particularly key is that the team shares the same values.

Louise explains, "Our patients often give feedback on how well they were treated in surgery – not only by the dentist but the dental nurse, too. In fact, from the moment they come through the door, they are made to feel welcome. It is important patients are comfortable with their surroundings during treatment."

Investment in technology and a modern surgery also helps to establish patient confidence in the team, and the practice continues to invest. They recently refurbished the surgery of dentist Mandy Bassford (who is also Jason's wife). A complete refurbishment with new cabinetry and equipment, it is designed so both clinician and dental nurse can work more ergonomically together in delivering high quality care to patients.

Louise says, "We've kept the existing dental chair, which is a Belmont chair, as it is reliable and functional. It is always really important to keep patients really comfortable on a supportive chair during treatment.

"We like to create a modern, clean and professional environment with up-to-date technology and high clinical standards to deliver our care. The team keeps abreast of new developments with training and by embracing the latest techniques and by following guidance."

"To deliver the best care we can, the relationship and trust between team members needs to be evident. Keeping staff happy and fulfilled helps everyone's work environment. Additionally, if patients see that we care about our team giving them the best treatment we can, it helps to enhance the relationship with them, too."

References available on request.