

Smile Together

Many column inches have been given over to the NHS dentistry crisis of late.

The so-called 'dental deserts' in pockets of the UK, where NHS is almost non-accessible, has been exacerbated by an exodus of dentists. Stats obtained by the Association of Dental Groups show numbers plummeting from 23,733 at the end of 2020 to 21,544 at the end of January 2022.

Meanwhile, patient watchdog Healthwatch England, has suggested the rising cost of living has made worse the problem, with the poorest communities hit most.

The effects of Covid-19, Brexit restrictions on overseas dentists working in the UK, escalating household bills and underfunding of NHS dentistry has, it seems, created the perfect storm.

Smile Together understands better than most the vast discrepancies that exist between socio-economic groups when it comes to dental access.

It is an employee-owned community interest company (CIC) commissioned by NHS England to provide urgent and emergency dental treatments for people who don't have their own dentist, run out-of-hours surgeries and apply expert skills to treat children and adults with a range of special care needs alongside oral surgery, children's orthodontics and treatments under general anaesthetic in a hospital setting. They also deliver competitively priced private dentistry from practices based in the heart of their communities, see children for free and run dedicated clinics for children in care and those experiencing homelessness.

health inequalities throughout Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

As one of the South West's largest NHS referral and emergency dental care providers, it also appreciates the challenges of recruitment in an area that has historically struggled to attract clinicians, having to compete against the appeal of vibrant cities.

Tracy Wilson is head of marketing and communications at Smile Together and acknowledges they face a difficult task.

'People in Cornwall are hugely in need of access to dentists but the challenges for us are the issues that affect all coastal and rural locations – attracting clinicians to deliver that care'.

To showcase Cornwall as an attractive career destination, the Smile Together team do the rounds of dental shows with a surfboard in tow, eager to extol the virtues of an improved quality of life away from the hustle and bustle of urban living.

But working with Smile Together offers so much more than a simple change of scenery.

It is also a beacon for those clinicians seeking to directly have impact for those people most in need of their skills – people from vulnerable groups with higher levels of untreated dental disease, for example, as well as those who experience barriers to accessing care.

Tracy explains: 'Smile Together is ideal for those dentists who want to focus their delivery of dentistry on those who need it most. We also offer really innovative progressive dentist opportunities with career progression in a safe, supportive environment. The delivery of urgent and



Tracy says: 'The team engagement here is profound. The experience of feeling valued and supported is important and we actively encourage team members to maintain and develop their clinical competency as we support their continuing professional and personal development via our Smile Together Training Academy.'

Smile Together recently ran a successful recruitment drive for dental therapists who'll get the chance to work to their full scope of practice – and treat a huge variation of patients – in practice as well as via outreach work in a mobile dental unit. They will support initiatives such as Cornwall Health for Homeless and Brighter Smiles. The focus of their recruitment campaign is now back to inspiring young dentists to genuinely consider delivering a valuable mix of urgent and emergency care alongside general dental care, whilst engaging in outreach initiatives and considering their career development choices with the company – it really is a win-win for all concerned.

'The complete immersion into the community certainly offers an alternative to the monotony that comes with working within the four walls of one surgery day in, day out. Also attractive is the fact that Smile Together's ethos is built on the ideal of collaboration. 100% of eligible employees are shareholders (they have a share each at the cost of £1), which gives everyone an equal and genuine voice in the business. They help steer what we do and how we do it. As a non-corporate, employee-owned CIC, free of any constraints or controlling interests by a higher authority, we have an impressive track record of turning colleagues' ideas into reality'.

One of the things the team felt passionately about was enhancing clinical environments and treatment options for patients. To this end, the development of its clinical settings is very much a shared vision, too.

With accessibility one of its main focuses, Smile Together is keen to deliver dentistry in the best environment possible, which is why it chose to breathe new life into an old grammar school, developed to an even higher spec thanks to a £1 million social investment from Big Issue Invest.

Utilising the skills of key contractors (among them Bristol-based DecaDent), they transformed it into a new, purpose-built dental

centre at the heart of the local community, with Belmont chairs (including model number SP-CLEO II) and cabinetry to ensure the best possible equipment for our patients.

The clinical team felt that: 'As well as being cosmetically impressive, the Cleo II offers significant practical benefits. The folding leg-rest, for example, makes it as easy to sit in as an armchair thereby creating a calm, non-intimidating environment for the patient. The operator console is also mounted below the patient, so that it can be positioned out of site until needed.'

The Harleigh Road Dental Centre is now a vibrant and busy multi-surgery practice in Bodmin that has increased access to emergency, specialist and routine general dental care with preventative support, education and treatment.

Part of Tracy's role involves reaching out to those companies who share a community interest ethos, which is why Smile Together chooses to work with DecaDent to collaborate on refurbishment, installation and design of all their practices.

Tracy explains: 'We have a long history of working in partnership with managing director, Miles Tucker, and his team at DecaDent who have helped us refurbish surgeries as well as create them from scratch. They recently refurbished two surgeries and completed a new one for us in Penzance. They also do our maintenance, including on the Isles of Scilly, and it's been a pleasure to have Miles and DecaDent on that journey with us.'

Indeed, DecaDent are keen supporters of Smile Together in other ways, too.

'As a company, we like to develop partnerships with companies that share the same ethos in the way we work. The relationship we have with DecaDent is not just one of contractor and customer; it's so much more than that and they generously support Brighter Smiles as well.'

Tracy concludes: 'Our shared vision is to enhance dental services, choice and quality of provision as well as deliver an outstanding patient experience. Ultimately, we want to continue developing Smile Together as an entity that tackles oral health inequality for happier healthier communities.'

If you want to know more about Smile Together and the career opportunities it offers, visit <https://smiletogether.co.uk/careers-portal/> ■



Additionally, its Brighter Smiles programme provides practical toothbrushing clubs, educational visits and fluoride varnishing to children in areas of high decay alongside other community initiatives such as Smiles at Sea, providing free dental treatment and oral health advice to fisherfolk across Cornwall and Devon who rarely get the chance to visit a dentist due to the demands of their work.

In this all-encompassing way, the CIC is dedicated to tackling the vast oral

emergency care is amazing grounding for those recently qualified, as it hones essential clinical skills, and alongside this are development choices including dental education, conscious sedation, special care, paediatrics, restorative care, oral surgery, endodontics, quality

improvement or clinical leadership in value-based healthcare dentistry! At Smile Together we can help our dentists progress their careers in the direction that best suits their aspirations.