

# Converting: how not to do it

Sheila Scott explains how to minimise risks when moving from NHS to private



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Conversion is scary. It's probably the biggest strategic change any principal ever makes in their practice. Those who have already converted and come out the other side can be bullish, and ready with advice on 'how to do it'. In the current NHS climate, it is tempting to rush into the transition from NHS to private just to get it over with. My advice is don't.

I know of some very fast, very hard conversions which have taken place recently – in overly busy NHS practices. Letters are sent to patients with a blunt message: 'sign up soon or lose out'. Whilst this approach might work in well-prepared and well-loved practices, it is dangerous if patients are not 100% convinced their dentist is the best or if there is a practice nearby accepting new NHS patients. Following a conversion there may be resentment. To retain the loyalty of plan patients it is necessary for them to experience a difference in care and service.

Failed conversions are usually due to factors which do not feature in a well-managed, strategically-focused practice. Below I identify the factors and recommend a strategy to be implemented in advance to secure a successful conversion:

**Patients don't appreciate what the practice does for them before the conversion starts.** Remember, if you've been working hard and fast on the NHS for some time, you're not likely to have taken precious time to impress patients with your care and attention – even



if you've been producing fantastic clinical work. Patients are unable to evaluate clinical standards but pick up on the quality of the environment, the friendliness of the team and the time spent listening to and meeting their needs.

#### The practice fails to set fees adequately.

Many principals do not calculate the necessary hourly rate for private care accurately – and then convince themselves they can continue working faster than they want to.

If you set the fees too low this will result in hard work throughout the change, and make it difficult to enhance the standard of care and service afterwards. Low fees lead to unstable finances and the necessity to see more patients every day. Early increase in plan subscription and treatment fees is then necessary, reducing patient confidence.

#### The practice fails to give patients good reasons for going private, or fails to show a difference after conversion.

The days of converting to 'continue the good work we've always done' are pretty much over. Evidence shows that patients want more trusting relationships with their dentist; more care and attention than ever before; more evidence of high standards; confidence in skills and safety in the practice, and reassurance that the practice is focusing on keeping them dentally healthy.

#### The team fail to pull together to support the conversion strategy.

I have seen conversions where the principal gives out autocratic instructions to the team but fails to set goals or instil them with confidence. Others rely on letters sent to patients to complete the conversion in the mistaken belief that a missive from their dentist will be enough to convert.

A practice which does not prepare for conversion should be prepared to fail. If you are introducing a monthly plan, such as CODEplan into the practice, you can get help from experienced advisors. Additionally, a consultant like myself can spend a day or two in the practice getting to know and understand the patients and the team and work with you to implement a strategy.

These are some of the steps I recommend:

- Find out before embarking on conversion how patients feel about the practice and the service provided so far. If patients are appreciative, the conversion will proceed smoothly.
- Please calculate the costs of providing the exact standard of care you feel is right for your patients, and stick to recovering these costs with confidence. Patient questionnaires tell us that it's usually not the costs per se that matters to patients – it's knowing what costs are, and feeling in control of costs.
- Practices that research patient needs and attitudes before conversion know exactly how to define and communicate what will be better in future, and really show that the change is worth it to patients. Result - a huge increase in confidence in the practice, and in patient response.
- The smoothest conversions are those where the whole team engages in planning the new service, the strategy for conversion, and practises communicating with patients and answering patient questions! This is the team's conversion too. Talk often. Meet regularly. Plan how to handle tricky issues and questions from patients.

To arrange a visit from a CODEplan consultant please call 01409 255 551 or email [info@CODEplan.co.uk](mailto:info@CODEplan.co.uk) Visit [CODEplan.co.uk](http://CODEplan.co.uk) for further information.

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