



Business Operations: Delivering Value

Elm Surgery: a surgery as a small business

Narrator

This is Elm Surgery in Plymouth and at first glance it seems very different from a low-cost airline or cinema chain, but in fact the surgery faces many similar challenges. In particular, how to maximise the utilisation of expensive or scarce resources.

Mike Davies, Practice Manager

We are a GP surgery and our basic role is to provide clinical services to patients who are ill. And we will either, you know, diagnose those patients and deal with them, providing treatment for them, or we'll refer them on to another part of the NHS, if they require, you know, a specialist consultant appointment. We're also managing a lot of patients who have a chronic disease such as diabetes or coronary heart disease and they're the patients that require regular monitoring.

Narrator

As a GP at the practice, Dr Tim Alexander juggles patient care with running a successful business.

Dr Tim Alexander, GP Partner

Day to day my job is principally consultation with patients. Alongside that, I'm effectively a partner in a small business.

We have sources of income from the NHS, we have a very little bit of private work from say, insurance reports and so on and at the end of the year, what is left in the pot after paying staff wages, paying for the building, paying the various day to day costs, that is what's left for us as the partners.

Narrator

The partners are just one of the stakeholder groups that need to be satisfied to ensure the success of the surgery.

Mike Davies

There are four main stakeholders. The patients are of course one of those stakeholders and they have a primary interest in the services that we deliver and the quality of those services that we deliver. The Primary Health Care Trust, which is effectively the NHS, they're clearly keen to ensure that we're meeting the, you know, necessary standards and delivering the services that the NHS wants us to provide. The other stakeholders are our staff who have clearly an interest in how the surgery performs and we need to make sure that we're developing and using our staff as effectively as we can. And of course our partners have a keen interest. The practice is a business, and clearly we have to run it along business lines. So we need to make sure that their goals are achieved, whether the goals are financial or otherwise.

Narrator

Practice management is still viewed as a fairly new role and there is considerably variability as to how it is carried out.

Mike Davies

I think general practice has changed more in the last three years than it has probably in the previous 20 years. Traditionally practice managers have been administrators and the partners have run the business and the practice manager has, and quite efficiently, made sure that the practice is fit for purpose. I think there is now a role in general practice, or

increasingly a role, for a business manager to come in and decide, with the partners, you know, where the practice is going, what the mission of the practice is, because that always needs to be articulated and then decide what the objectives are and then actually, you know, work towards delivering those objectives.

General practice is after all, you know, a business and the core components and the stakeholders, you know, are common to, are common to any business really and therefore I think a business approach is absolutely vital.

Dr Tim Alexander

We probably have the nice position compared with most small businesses that our customer is not going to go away. We can lose patients to other practices because they're fed up with us or because they wait too long to see us or because they can't get an appointment. Equally we can gain patients because we may gain a reputation as a good or caring practice or as a set of doctors who will listen and try our best for them.

Mike Davies

We don't have unlimited resource. There are not unlimited financial resources available within the NHS anyway, but particularly here. So clearly what we have to do is we have to look after, you know, a group of patients which is roughly 6000 so we have 6000 patients. We only have so much clinician time, so clearly there's always a balance to be achieved between the amount of time we have available to see patients and the amount of time they want from us and that's always a very tricky one to manage. I think we manage quite successfully, I think our results show that we manage it successfully. And I think, I think it's about understanding what the demand is really and where that demand is coming from and almost understand it before it really hits you, so that we're constantly, you know, measuring how much clinician time we're using, what patients are seeing us for, so that we can channel patients really in the right direction. It's never going to be a perfect scenario but we do try and wherever we can to achieve that balance.