

Recruiting good dental nurses

Michael Bentley discusses apprenticeships, attracting qualified nurses, and salary banding.



I have now spent 21 years in dentistry, and I have never seen the industry so short of dental nurses.

This is not just a problem affecting rural areas, it is a UK-wide issue and this article will address potential solutions.

Let's start with apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are interesting, and something I have had mixed results with. However, over the last few years it is clear that the only way to increase the pool of dental nurses is

by having apprentices.

For an investment of £8k a year, based on a 2019 UK apprenticeship salary, you can have an additional team member for 39 hours per week. They will spend, on average, one day a week at college, and I would encourage that you give your apprentice study leave so this should equate over the year.

To recruit apprentices I suggest hosting an open day or evening – place an advert at the job centre and local schools about your practice's apprenticeship opportunities. You can use the event for immediate recruitment. Carry out an inspiring presentation to talk about the brand story of the practice (delivered by owner or practice

manager), the career opportunities as a dental nurse (delivered by the practice manager), what it's like to be a dental nurse at the practice (delivered by one of your nurses). You can then exchange CVs and carry out interviews with potential candidates. Keep your questions short and include practical elements. Areas I find work well are: mixing alginate, hand washing, and taking computer notes. Once this is complete, benchmark the candidates and decide who to offer your opportunities to.

For induction and ongoing support my top tips are:

- Set up an apprenticeship contract with a six-month probationary period. ➔

Michael Bentley

is a business consultant at Horton Consulting.

● Have a designated apprenticeship trainer – this should be a qualified nurse and someone who understands how to train your systems, they must be able to nurture and be a buddy for the apprentices. You do need to increase the pay level for this role; I would recommend 25p-50p an hour for this additional role.

● You need to have set systems in place so that the training is successful and follows regulatory and brand standards.

● The apprentice is to have a clear plan for learning the dental nurse role. I would split this up into 12 months and have clear additional skills each month that they are going to learn.

● Enrol them with a college placement, support them with the workload and ensure they are on track.

● Make sure feedback is constructive and is provided every week in a one-to-one meeting – ask them how the last week has been. Make sure welfare is managed; apprentices are young and need looking after – remember they are not qualified nurses so development rates will be different.

● If there is a failure of work or attitude then swift management is needed.

● If they complete their apprenticeship with you make sure you raise their salary to a qualified status.

I would suggest taking on two apprentices, perhaps three if you have a larger practice. The reason for this is that there is a high fallout rate – one in two apprentices do not continue – so you may as well recruit two from the outset. If you cannot accommodate them both, don't worry; at the end of the apprenticeship you can support them in finding a practice to move to.

Recruiting qualified nurses

The first challenge you face when recruiting a qualified nurse is attracting them to your practice. A fair salary based on experience is essential. You need to be very clear when advertising what you are looking for, utilising key aspects

of the job description, and really putting your brand stamp into the advert. Additional benefits are also a win-win, so if you cover nurse registration and indemnity this is the time to shout about it.

It is also nice to ask the team what skills they are looking for too. They often suggest things that you had not thought of before, or didn't realise was missing from the mix.

I have to be honest, I am not a big fan of a CV so I recommend you create an application form and send it to anyone who applies with a CV. The application has two parts; questions that would appear on a normal CV and then questions about dentistry. This approach allows you to see who is really interested in a job – if someone can take the time to fill out an application form then that is a fabulous start.

There are five key stages to the recruitment process:

1. Welcome the potential employee and give them a tour of your practice
2. Interview questions – split into clinical questions and patient experience questions
3. Practical exercises are vital, so you should test them in these areas:
 - A) Decontamination
 - B) Hand washing
 - C) Computer notes
 - D) Charting
4. Document checklist
5. Answering questions and confirmation of what happens next

Once the main interview is complete, benchmark the candidates and decide on which ones will have a paid trial day. Don't skip this stage as it has major advantages for you and for the candidate.

On the trial, make sure that the candidate buddies up with the most experienced/senior nurse. This team member will demonstrate your brand, systems and will allow the candidates to work alongside some of your key clinicians. This will be useful for the candidate to confirm that they do want to work for you and that they can fit into your team.

When you do make an offer to the successful candidate, set up a

contract meeting. All being well from this meeting you will have your start date, uniform on order and your induction ready to go.

Salary banding

I'm a firm believer in salary banding in dental practices. Salary banding has been around for years – everyone knows each other's salary depending on their role and position.

Salary banding needs to start with a base salary and then you work from there. You are looking at paying £9.50 per hour for a qualified nurse, but please look at your local area to clarify this. Salaries need to build from here based on higher responsibilities such as CQC responsibility and leader positions – anywhere up to £1 extra an hour for each additional role.

There are lots of additional skills that you need to take into account including radiography, oral health education, sedation, implants, photography, impressions/scanning, and so on. For these skills, you can pay up to 50p an hour for each as long as they are at a fully competent level and you are using them regularly in the practice.

If you don't start moving this way, nurses will leave and ultimately you will have to recruit nurses that are more expensive than the ones that have left. Having an opportunity to renegotiate their wages is the top reason why nurses move to another practice.

Finally, I want to talk to you about longevity increases. You have an opportunity to increase salary by an additional £1 per hour at five years' service and then again at 10 years' service. There is another option which is an increase in holiday to five weeks' after five years' service and six weeks after 10 years' service. You may ask why you would do that, but then we go back to the lifecycle; if you want to retain the knowledge and experience that you have worked so hard to train in your business then you need to reward loyalty or the nurses with experience will leave to pastures new.