

Leading by example

Sandra Gower talks about being a national figurehead for practice managers and why being awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the RCGP is good news for primary care

Sandra Gower is a dynamo of practice management. Her philosophy of 'go for gold' has seen her transform not only GP practices but also practice management itself.

The first practice manager in England to gain Fellowship by Assessment (FBA) of the Institute of Healthcare Management (IHM), a quality assurance system based on RCGP FBA, she has led the way in championing the profession.

And now she's in line for another first. Later this month she will be awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the RCGP, the first ever to be given to a practice manager.

"Although it's a personal award it recognises the profession as a whole. I'm very flattered to be thought of as a champion for practice managers, but there are still strides to be made and challenges to face."

Sandra came to practice management in the 1980s after working at Barclays. Although she enjoyed her job there, she felt frustrated by the lack of opportunities available to her in banking and spent some time doing work experience at a GP surgery.

What started off as a part-time interest quickly became a full-time commitment when a partnership split resulted in her appointment as practice manager. Finding that she enjoyed the challenge of helping to build up a new practice from scratch, she realised she had found her niche.

After seven years she took on yet another challenge when she moved to Bennetts End, a large training practice in Hemel Hempstead.

In addition to being Managing Partner of the practice, Sandra networks extensively and juggles a host of other professional activities.

Among other things she was a member of the QOF national organisation review, chairs the IHM Fellowship/FBA national working group and VTS National Steering Group, and is a trustee of the

Throughout her career, quality has been Sandra's top priority. At the time of joining Bennetts End she was in her third year as Chair of the Association of Managers in General Practice, the only national organisation solely representing managers in general practice, and went on to become a national trainer and assessor, contributing to the first Code of Principle for Managers in Primary Care – an achievement about which she still feels passionately.

"I feel very strongly that managers in primary care should be regulated and should demonstrate their fitness to practise. This helps not only the profession but is ultimately good news for patients too."

Sandra has been at Bennetts End since 1990, first as Practice Business and Development Manager and, since 1997, as a Managing Partner. She credits Sir Denis Pereira Gray as being instrumental in this move – it was after hearing him deliver the 1995 Sally Irvine Lecture on Diversity in Practice that the GP partners at the surgery invited her to become a partner herself. She says:

"I don't think the doctors and healthcare staff noticed a difference after I became a partner, but the patients most definitely did. Personally, it increased my commitment to deliver even more quality patient services, and it extended my responsibility for the business."

Team working is instrumental in Sandra's approach to management and this is conceptualised in the Bennetts End hot-air-balloon logo.

"We were thinking of ideas for our practice logo, and while I was visiting family in Ross-on-Wye I saw a hot-air balloon being prepared for a flight. There were a lot of people involved in the launch and it struck me that the balloon was a good symbol of teamwork – it gave me the feeling of the sky's the limit – and would make a fitting logo for the Bennetts End team."



"We never rest on our laurels. The big project at the moment is to increase access and responsiveness. Our annual patient questionnaire showed that the majority of patients were keen for us to open on Saturday mornings, so we are looking at how we can balance continuity of care and the doctor-patient relationship with the demand for more access."

Bennetts End has a reputation for developing services in response to patient need. The practice has a Teen Screen initiative based on research carried out by a doctor and nurse at the surgery. Adolescent focus groups were consulted to find out what their needs were and the resulting service was advertised in local schools.

in recognition of its innovative practice management with the effective partnership of clinical and management skills in delivering quality integrated patient services.

However, Sandra is very clear that the improvements have been brought about by teamwork and is quick to praise the dedication of the practice's 13 GPs – the majority of whom are partners – as well as the nurses, healthcare workers, reception staff and volunteers.

"Partnership planning can be very effective, but to make it work you have to trust your colleagues. If the management side of the practice is running smoothly it means that the GPs and nurses can