ROLE MODEL

Sandeep Dahiya

The consultant rheumatologist tells Adrian O’Dowd how team lunch breaks help to cement a happy work environment and motivate colleagues.

Team building and making the job “fun” may explain why consultant rheumatologist Sandeep Dahiya has become a role model that colleagues flock to work with.

The doctor, who qualified in India before coming to work in the UK in 1995, believes that clinicians often place excessively high expectations on themselves and, despite being an advocate for hard work, he encourages them to “pace themselves.”

During his time as consultant rheumatologist in Peterborough City Hospital within the North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust, Dahiya has provided several formal and informal mentorships for colleagues. He has been keen to help them strike a good work-life balance, while ensuring they enjoy their work.

“I’ve noticed that people have quite a lot of self-doubt,” he says. “The most important thing is to be confident about your craft rather than looking uncertain, pacing yourself with the right intensity, and having the ability to switch off to avoid burnout.

“It’s like a marathon—30 or 40 years of working requires you to find the right kind of intensity and pace. Some people go at it a bit too fast and burn out and some people go too slow and they get bored. I say everybody has their own pace.”

It is also important to maintain interests outside of work, he stresses, saying, “I always encourage a good work-life balance. One of my things is fitness and exercise, it helps you to switch off. I try to follow my own advice—I’ve been playing regular club cricket for 25 years and run over 40 km every week.”

Dahiya has enjoyed building up the current team at Peterborough City Hospital, where he has worked since 2006. “When I came here, it was a small department with just two consultants. Within three years, they had both retired so I was left as a lead clinician with nobody to lead.

“I almost had to start from scratch—which was challenging—but I built a team and we managed to attract the right people. Now we have one of the biggest teams in the east of England, with six consultants and several nurse practitioners and registrars.”

Good communication is key for team building, says Dahiya, who likes to build team relationships by inviting everyone to have their lunch break together—an idea that has paid off.

“It was something we started many years ago and we have continued as a tradition,” he says. “It’s part of having a break and having switch-off time—we have a rule that we never talk about work during lunch.

“It’s a good way to build relationships but it’s also a way to recruit people because others hear us laughing and they wonder which department we are, and they want to join us.

“If somebody is a bit down, you wouldn’t normally notice it in a busy clinic or in the corridor, but it becomes obvious when you’re having lunch together.”

Lifelong learning is also vital to Dahiya, who has been involved in postgraduate training. As he says, “Constructive and honest feedback is something that’s important. Every doctor is a teacher so every time you work with them, you pick up a little bit from them and then develop your own style.

“Seeing some of these very bright colleagues who I have appointed doing so well is great. I enjoy having this fantastic team and look forward to going to work, which is fun.”

Adrian O’Dowd, London

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