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Why I... lunch with the team

GP John Fullbrook tells **Adrian O'Dowd** why having lunch every working day with the whole GP team helps build morale and makes work more enjoyable

Adrian O'Dowd

Lunchbreaks are almost a certainty for doctors but ensuring they become a shared, bonding experience can help boost workplace morale and make work more enjoyable.

So says John Fullbrook, a GP based in Leamington Spa in Warwickshire, who introduced shared lunches with all the GPs at his practice shortly after joining almost 25 years ago.

Fullbrook became a partner at the Clarendon Lodge Medical Practice in 1996 and soon spotted a slight disconnect between the people working there. "When I first arrived, everyone got on well and there was a team meeting every Monday, but I felt what was lacking was daily integration of the clinical staff," he says. "The doctors weren't meeting regularly at lunchtime."

Fullbrook, who has been senior partner at the practice since 2010, got the idea for shared lunches from training and working at other practices. He says, "I'd trained in two practices where they both had a culture of meeting at lunchtime and I really enjoyed that."

"Also, I had a six month locum spell during which I was in a single handed practice. During that time, I felt incredibly exposed and isolated. It made me realise how much I relied on and needed that nurturing and support from other clinicians, so it seemed logical to me to continue that."

Fullbrook introduced the lunchtime gatherings within his first year of joining the practice and the response was positive. "The initial barriers were about convenience," he says. "It took hold and I think everyone enjoyed it. It's been an interesting barometer because there have been times when there were tensions within the partnership and you could tell that some people weren't making the effort to come along as they might."

"Then you could go to them and say, 'is everything okay?' Everyone recognises that it's a stressful job and, at times, things get on top of you. That willingness just to relax a little and let yourself join in with other people is good."

"We've been doing this for a long time and with great success, especially for the younger GPs."

The topics that come up most often during lunch time tend to be personal and light hearted, he says, adding, "We'll sometimes talk about clinical things and sometimes we just talk about personal or fun things or things from the outside world."

"We used to try to do it from 1 pm to 2 pm but now it tends to be between 1.30 pm to 2 pm because, with the demand, we don't have that much time. The idea

was that there was a common window in the middle of the day where we could all meet up."

The meetings have had a noticeable impact, he says: "Communication improved. It was a way to help the younger, more inexperienced, members of staff feel more comfortable asking questions."

The shared lunchtime gatherings are a model for a successful, happy practice, he argues, saying, "I'd recommend the idea to all general practices. As a binding agent for an organisation, it's been helpful. It's something that you look forward to. It helps our overall health and wellbeing."

"We've had people within the organisation that at times have struggled and been worried about burnout so these lunches have been a good way of being able to talk and get things cleared up."

The surgery also introduced team huddles around the start of the covid-19 pandemic. Fullbrook says, "We thought it was a good idea to set the tone for the day. Each morning, 15 minutes before the doors open to patients, everybody will meet—socially distanced—in the downstairs waiting area and whoever is the duty doctor that day will run through things, checking with every team member, and everyone will say what they're doing that day."

"Everyone then knows what everyone else is doing. It's a nice way to start the day and you feel connected with other people."

How to make the change

- Have colleagues buy into the idea by convincing them that the lunches are worthwhile for cohesion, communication, and coordination in the workplace
- Plan how it will work and when suits most people
- Reassure people that it is not obligatory to attend but encourage them to come
- Think about having the right physical space within the practice for everyone to attend
- Consider rearranging appointments and surgery time to allow for the meetings.