

Rediscovered Passion for Dentistry Through COVID-19 Crisis

Practice Solutions Profiles

Julie Buchanan, D.D.S.

St. George, Utah



Team Design

Moved from 14 part-time to 7 full-time employees.



Leadership Skills

Chose to view her practice reopening as a chance to start fresh.



Daily Production

Average daily production rose from \$5,000 to more than \$7,500

About

For Dr. Julie Buchanan, becoming a dentist was almost a foregone conclusion. Her father was a dentist and starting in high school, she began working as a dental assistant in his practice. She soon graduated from Creighton University School of Dentistry and started practicing with her father and his associate in 2003.

Dr. Buchanan is an active member of her community and stays involved through Spear Study Club and Spear Faculty Club.

The practice prior to COVID-19 crisis

Dr. Buchanan and her father ran a successful, well-established practice, but she always felt short on money and short on time. She was constantly looking for new ways to earn extra income including working longer hours or investigating alternative streams of revenue.

As a people pleaser, Dr. Buchanan would consistently working for the good of those around her, even if it was to her own detriment. She spent hours puzzling together the schedules of her four part-time hygienists, three part-time assistants, three part-time front desk employees, and one part-time office manager. She avoided conflict to keep everyone around her happy and simply focused on working harder.

As a leader, Dr. Buchanan was easily swayed by the majority. If her team didn't want to do something, she felt helpless to influence their behavior. Her voice was lost in the busy practice.

The budget for the practice was out of control with her father's salary and overhead taking up most of the production. Even with three dentists working in the practice, a typical month with 20 days of production frequently amounted to less than \$100,000. Dr. Buchanan's salary was often less than some of her employees, and at times her unwillingness to address conflict meant she didn't get paid at all.

"I knew something needed to change, but I couldn't identify what wasn't working and what needed to be fixed. Each week was filled with problems of its own, and I didn't have time to really assess the situation. I felt like I was always scrambling."

Shut down during COVID 19 crisis

As the COVID-19 crisis was beginning, Dr. Buchanan felt out of control and wasn't enjoying her practice. She and her father had lengthy conversations about the future of the practice, and he decided to retire.

When COVID-19 forced the practice to shut down temporarily, it was the pause Dr. Buchanan needed to think about and redefine her practice. She decided to take control and reclaim her passion for dentistry.

She furloughed her entire team, scrutinized her finances and worked with her Practice Solutions consultant to create her vision for the practice.

Life with Practice Solutions and looking ahead

Once Dr. Buchanan realized that being a strong leader and being selfish are two very different things, she was able to articulate how she wanted her new practice to function.

She decided to only bring back those hygienists, assistants and front desk employees who were willing to work full time. She also added two full-time assistants. As the now sole doctor in the practice, she was able to hire her dream team.

Dr. Buchanan followed Spear's recovery plan and implemented every initiative, including the recovery budget. She secured outside financing and even though the practice was only open for 11 days in May, production was more than \$80,000. Her overhead is under control and she now pays herself first.

Dr. Buchanan's front desk team is trained to schedule to maximize production. She is working shorter hours and producing more. The days are less stressful and Dr. Buchanan gets to focus on dentistry, her passion.

The now full-time hygienists are taking ownership of their patient relationships by filling their own appointments. They are trained on how to address patient concerns about COVID-19 and are explaining why longer, single visits are less risky.

As the budget is now under control, Dr. Buchanan's team is offering effective payment plans to their patients during the crisis. They are agreeing to pre-payment before they arrive in the office to limit exposure for the front desk team. The practice now offers in-house financing and installed an auto-debit software program to handle the new payment plans.

The patient experience has changed significantly in Dr. Buchanan's office. The team is following COVID-19 protocols and encouraging patients. Patients are now asked to follow COVID-19 protocols, as well. If the patient agrees to keep the appointment, they are asked to arrive on time or risk not receiving another appointment.



Dr. Buchanan has become a true leader for her team. She is an excellent communicator and grew professionally during the health crisis. She is now leading her team, helping them implement their "new normals" and is now able to enjoy the financial rewards of her hard work.

"I feel like a weight has been lifted off me," Dr. Buchanan said. "When everything stopped, I had time to think. I used the opportunity to go back to the drawing board and create a vision that I can be excited about. Practicing dentistry is fun again!"

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