



INVESTORS IN PEOPLE MAKES FOR GOOD 'GENERAL PRACTICE' says KAREN NORTHWOOD, Managing Partner of the Friends Road Medical Practice

"Simply throwing money at something is rarely a genuine solution to anything," declares Karen Northwood the Managing Partner of the Friends Road Medical Practice in Croydon, Surrey. "You really need to think much more systematically about what is going to produce results."

After a number of years when money has been pumped liberally into the NHS it looks likely that the tap will soon be turned lower. So it's an opportune moment to examine what is cost effective and what is not. For managers on the NHS's front line - like Karen Northwood - it has always been a challenge to work out where the priorities should be. GPs' surgeries operate, in effect, as small businesses under the bigger umbrella provided by the NHS Primary Care Trusts (PCT) and there is local discretion in how the money is spent. Yet many of the costs - most notably the doctors' salaries - are fixed within a national framework. So when it comes to an 'optional extra' such as, for example, staff development, there is always the risk that it could be relegated down the pecking order.

Thankfully at Friends Road the importance of people development is safeguarded through the Investors in People framework. Experience shows that this delivers improved performance in a more intelligent and cost-effective way than just writing large cheques. Friends Road has been recognised as an Investor in People for over a decade and



its leading status within medical services is now well recognised. Indeed, twenty five GP surgeries in the Croydon and Merton area have followed the lead of Friends Road into Investor in People recognition - the biggest influx of GP practices to happen anywhere. Meanwhile Friends Road became an official Investors in People 'Champion'. "We are very fortunate that the Croydon PCT is very supportive of Investors in People - but I must say

that is not the case with every PCT," says Karen bluntly.

Investors in People is, of course, about much more than training (important though that is). Leadership and management, business strategy, internal communications and people development are all on the agenda. And as Karen explains, when she arrived at the practice in the mid 1990's this was the management tool she valued most. Although Friends Road was very good clinically it was not seen to be well-managed. And while Karen's previous at a Health Authority had given her vital experience in the macro-management of General Practices, what she needed when she took over in 1996 at Friends Road was a practical checklist of what had to be done in terms of human resources, employment law, change management and development. Fortunately she found it in Investors in People. "It was perfect!" she says in retrospect. "It helped to transform the practice."

Deep Changes ---

Not that it was all easy-going. Karen will be the first to admit that when she first broached to her colleagues the possibility of going for Investors in People it was less than warmly received. After all, it would mean changes and the adoption of disciplines which had not existed before. Some people found this threatening.

"Yes, developing the processes to meet the Standard meant some deep changes for the practice," says Karen. "But some people were not prepared to accept that and had to leave. It proved to be a long two years. But once we were through that initial period we started to see the results - and they were impressive."

In fact, the process of becoming an Investor in People acted, in Karen's words, as a 'real tonic' for the practice. Under Karen's leadership, performance measures and organisational strategies were introduced which had a dramatic impact. People who had previously acted purely individualistically started to come together as a team. Sickness levels dropped as motivation rose. Job descriptions were looked at afresh and a consistent system of appraisal was introduced. And, in a very important innovation, a coherent programme of training and development was launched.

Of course, as well as being good for the staff the patients also benefited. Less absence meant that people could be seen quicker and the team was put under less strain. Training and development opportunities helped improve people's performance while better motivation raised levels of commitment to delivering a good quality service.

The pleasing outcome was that Friends Road became one of the first medical practices in the UK to achieve recognition against the Investors in People Standard. Moreover, the advances gained through Investors in People were so clear-cut that everyone in the organisation became a fan of Investors in People. "The whole team now understands that being an Investor in People is intrinsic to what we are," explains Karen. "It's no longer a matter of choice. It has become deeply embedded in the organisation and it's evident in the way we communicate with each other and the support we give each other. It's become a matter of our identity."

Wider -----

Karen's success in reshaping Friends Road attracted attention from the Croydon Primary Care Trust and as part of her role as a practice management adviser to the PCT she, along with two other practice management advisers began looking at the wider issues of training and development across the area. Not surprisingly her message about the benefits of Investors in People was then taken to a wider audience. But her emphasis was very practical. "Forget the badge," she said. "Just focus on the framework and think about how it can help your practice."

A series of seminars was organised to explain the Standard and the number of GP practices who were seriously interested soon started to mount up. The process of supporting practices embarking on the Investors in People journey was delivered through six one day workshops, covering everything from business planning, training & development to preparing for Investors in People assessment. Karen made the appeal of Investors in People very clear. "If you are looking to grow the practice and motivate your staff then this is the way to do it," she explained.

Support networks were created for the scores of people who became involved in the drive towards Investors in People and this mutual back-up and know-how exchange contributed to the record results. Subsequently, the overwhelming majority of surgeries which achieved recognition returned in due course for further Investors in People reviews. "The benefits were clearly to be seen in terms of less staff turn-over, reduced recruitment costs, fewer complaints and better morale and motivation," says Karen. "It's no surprise they stuck with it."

So if you are looking for a prescription for a wonder drug to upgrade the NHS, it's there in three clear letters - IIP.